

A Book Of

Kashmiri Short Stories

Introduction and translation from the Kashmiri by

M. Siddiq Beig



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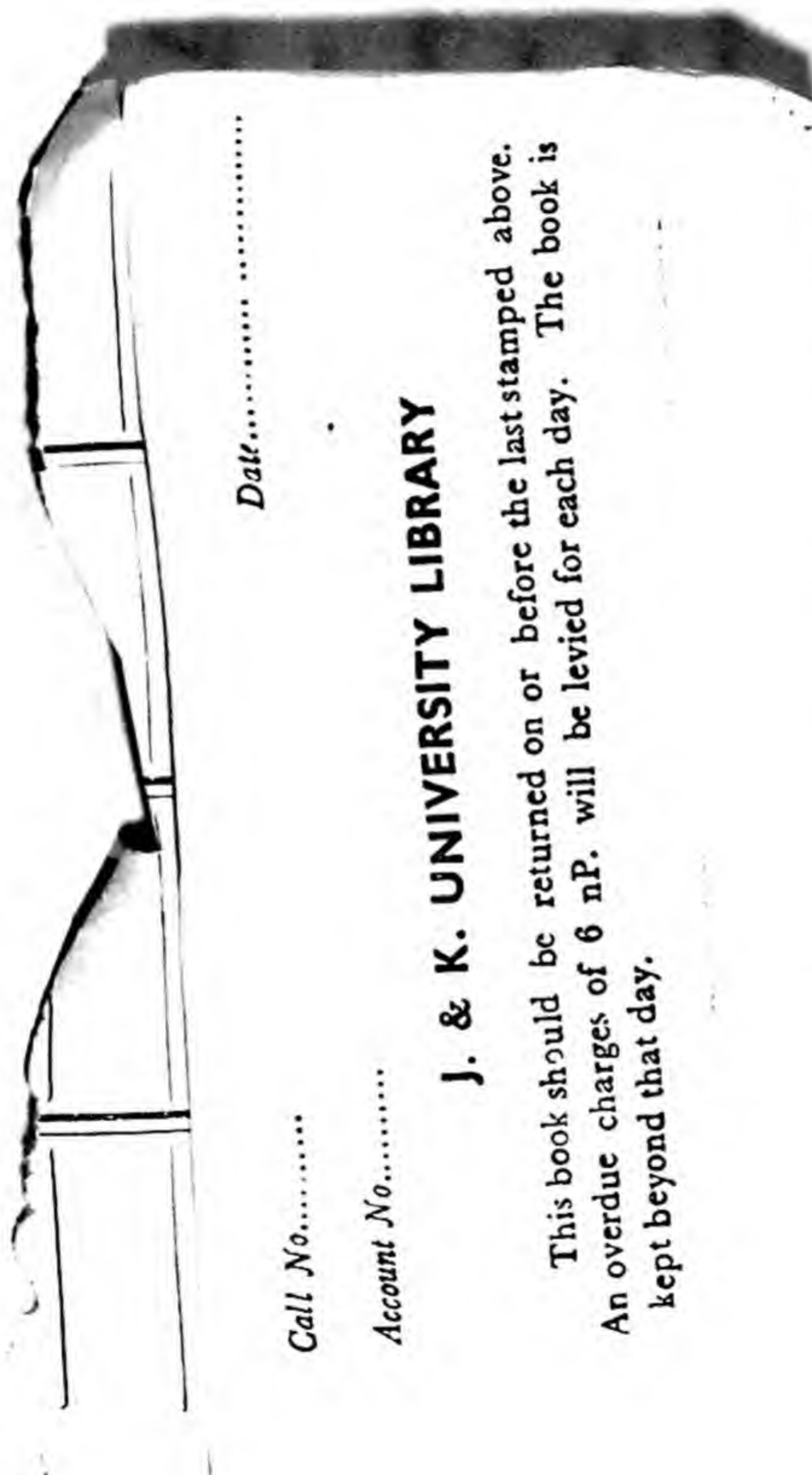
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M. Siddiq Beig



PEN PRODUCTIONS

SRINAGAR, ~~INDIA~~

A BOOK OF KASHMIRI SHORT STORIES

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Preface

Kashmiri, in spite of its richness and its significance as a repository of common human experience and accumulated social wisdom, has not received the attention and recognition which other regional languages have deservedly and quite abundantly received. This balance is to be redressed precisely because the valley inhabited by its speakers has become a test case for preserving, strengthening and consolidating the values which are sought to be validated. No amount of economic amelioration, tinkering mechanical measures and efforts at face-lifting shall strike the chords if the deeper cravings of the people's soul are not hearkened to and there is no communication and interaction with the throbbing hearts of a wider public. This effort is all the more necessary and relevant when the people speaking this language are undergoing a harrowing and chastening experience; — perhaps

no cynic the world over is so irremediably cynical as to ask the proverbial old-man to make the donkey ride him after all his efforts at being responsive to the behests of others made him only a butt of ridicule. His shocked and the lacerated soul is not a spectacle for the sadists to gloat over. His trials and tribulations have left him maturer, wiser and mellower, and he is to be received as such, not as the 'prodigal son' received out of pity by the pitying father as an act of *noblesse oblige*; that will be abhorrent to a proud soul. Nobody for that matter is wiser than wisdom itself. He has given and is capable of giving more.

This modest effort of presenting the English translation of selected Kashmiri short stories has been inspired with this end in view.

The short story writers need no introduction as they stand in their own rights as the men who love their people they treat of and share their griefs and sorrows. They would deem their lives lived fully, meaningfully, and well, if the human being comes to his own.

I owe a debt of gratitude to Professor Shafi Shauq of the University of Kashmir for his unstinted assistance in making the material available, its compilation and other tiring details. I am thankful to my friend Mr. Mohammad Maqbool for his help in preparing the type script of a part of the manuscript.

Finally, I would like to my wife Saleema, my son Shahnawaz and my daughter Sabba whose loving assistance has enabled me to complete the Book.

April 1995

M.Siddiq Beig
Gulab Bagh, Srinagar - 6

Introduction

In presenting herewith the English translation of selected Kashmiri short stories, it is intended that they reach a wider public. The milieu is Kashmir itself and language is Kashmiri which encapsulates in its fold the history, the dreams, unconscious, individual as well as collective, of its speaking community as no other medium does. Effort has been made to see to it that the immediacy, intimacy and facility of the original is preserved and maintained, much more so because some stories have been written decades back in the rural atmosphere and in small towns which were not much different in the sense of belongingness, rootedness, and self-sufficient closeness typical then of the rural side, in spite of oppression and poverty.

The stories, though not in a strict chronological order, present the life of the artisan, common people in different walks of life,

their hopes and aspiration, small sorrows and joys, their afflictions, and unroll their lives in resolving their conflicts to a happy turn so far as the circumstances allowed, all along characterized by hope and optimism in spite of the social restriction though the rumbling of coming social dissolution can be read between the lines.

Again, there are stories where characters, instead of reigning supreme in so far as they are working out their own lives to a certain destiny in spite of the limited opportunity and vistas open to them, are play-things of circumstances and relegated to the background as only things put to use consciously or unconsciously for ends in which they have no say; circumstances and situations reign supreme. Effort will be made to make it clear how this change came into being and how the writer, while keeping intact his artistic expression, does not remain unaffected by them. A synopsis of the first phase will thus be necessary.

Akhtar Mohi-ud-Din in his "Red Silken Trousers" shows Nabir Shala and his spouse living contentedly doing their darning despite their poverty, old age and deprivations. Nabir Shala is, however, painfully aware of his condition that he merely ekes out a bare hand-to-mouth living for himself, only fattening others who monopolize the trade. Oblivious to the miseries, he is giving mouth to songs and loves life and his environs that provide stuff to his soul. How he enjoys doing all this in his wooden shack of a hut overlooking the Jhelum. His wife, too, in spite of the death of all her male children in their childhood and the poignant memories thereof, is unbroken and alive in so far as she relives her past intimacy in donning the only remaining red silken trousers of her bridal outfit to regale her husband. The interference of the scandalized son-in-law only provokes to assert the inviolability of his private life: "I am king and master unto my own domain, I have done nothing unbecoming by way of theft."

Omesh Koul's "The Heart" portrays Mehri getting more understanding and mature as she, from out of her initial dislike for Fatah, grows to like him after the vicissitudes of life and this tempers him into a feeling man, full of concern for her, and he is

no longer to this change a lump of clay that repelled her first. The expression to this change is understandably given through wordless sorrows and joys which need an immediacy like Rem Dyad to formulate in words. In Amin Kamil's "The Cock-Fight", the incident takes place in a town which is hardly different from the place in a rural homestead. The joys and envies and superstitions of the social lag are still common.

These pleasures are getting uncommon as the worries of changing social and industrial life wrap people up and tear them apart. The intimacy and the family-like atmosphere with its prying and petty harmless rivalries is apparent in the close self-sufficient social and economic life. The joys and comically queer envies and rivalries would leave them independent of extraneous sources of pleasure; the bread earner, besides, took on the high pedestal of the beloved one in fulfilling the small but significant demands.

Bimla, in Bansi Nirdoshe's "This Too is a Feeling", is overtaken by remorse and pitying concern for the man who has been pining for years to take a look of her after he helped her out with an umbrella on a torrential rainy day. She does so in spite of the social propriety shown by her grand mother, aunt and uncle. This sense, pathos and tragic unrequited love to man was gratifying and flattering to the heart as against the apathy, indifference and pure utilitarianism that mark relations now.

Ved Lal in Deepak Koul's "The Journey and the Fellow Travelers" is reminiscent of love and oneness with those to whom one was related then. He had earned the endearing sobriquet of "Mama" as one's maternal uncle is called. In total disregard of his personal life and comforts, he parts with all that he has to meet the social bindings of Tota Koul's daughter in relation to her matrimonial life and of others with whom he comes across, all the while hopeful of being taken care of on his old decrepit age by those whose Mama he is. Meanwhile, the household breaks through various socio-economic compulsions of service, leaving Ved Lal alone and unwanted, clinging to his old memories and hopes and he finally finds himself in a 'dharamshala' where he

dies friendless. His acquaintances whose company and social life he had enlivened by his humour and amiable nature do not feel concerned.

These are some of the representative stories of the period when insulation had not taken place; the sense of not being uprooted, of being close to nature with its characteristic rhythm, and the hope of things and life taking care of themselves on their own were an integral part of the emotional and mental make up of the individual making for that composure and contentedness which seemed to give substance and meaning to life as it was lived.

The world around, with the western world spearheading it, suffered many change and was overtaken by the inanity and hopelessness of the mechanical and industrial life. It appeared all the more hideous because of the break up of home, by hypocrisy and tenseness and superficiality of social life. Man got a drift due to the collapse of old values and faith, unrelieved by any cohesive cementing factor in the shape of new values and any all-encompassing faith. Its wars produced 'shell shocks' and 'soul shocks', leaving the individual stranded and causing colossal social dislocations, financial and economic crashes and bankruptcies, with millions dead and maimed. All this made it a categorical imperative to spin new alternatives and new nostrums.

Of all this Kashmiri were blissfully unaware, much like Jane Austin's characters are ignorant of Napoleonic wars. They were still contented with their lot:

taryi Jarman asyi kyah karyi looloo
asyi garyi batti asyi kyah karyi looloo.

(Let the German cross over. No worry, we have
the rice to eat at our home).

Or of a still more earlier phase, a nursery rhyme sung by children in chorus:

garyi chhuni zaalun/gatshav swani shallun/haari tsatav
lot.suy dimav aarmyis/aarum dyiyi haak/haakas dyimav paak..

An amazing contentment amidst poverty and famines, and pluck and fortitude to lump it if they could not take it.

Europe was socially disintegrating and getting disillusioned, and the optimism of their revolutions and democracy was a far cry. Misuse of science and other disciplines had dehumanized all institutions, landing humanity into the blind alleys and paradoxes which the thinkers and politicians wanted lay and question. The critical and mentally independent individuals were already confronting their governments and calling their bluff in showing the hollowness and hypocrisy of democracies and institutions at home exposing their predatory and exploitative character in the colonies and abroad. Democracy had come to mean mere endless debates, only drowning in its noise and din the protests against vested interest and using masses at large as cannon fodder. Versailles Treaty, its repartation and humiliation indicated that German Nazism would pose a threat to entire humanity, physically and spiritually.

Yet the ideas of democracy, liberation and the giant strides taken then in the realm of science and other disciplines left its imprint which inspired the sensitive people in various countries, including India. They were inspired to pull their countrymen out of poverty and social stagnation that had made them a prey to social backwardness, superstition and castism and its sanctification by indigenous priesthood in league with the local landed gentry whose common interests locked them indissolubly together.

What if the devotion, orgies resulting from the participation mystique released in various socio-religious festivals were tapped and directed against poverty, social backwardness and what is more, against the more palpable foreign rulers who, to begin with, unwittingly though, let the social change happen through their railways and innovations in communication etcetra, but later on took counsel that to maintain their colonial domination, it was better to let things be as they were.

The colonial domisnation could be hoisted with its own petard, by taking a leaf from its own history. The treatment of Indians in

South Africa as creatures of lesser breed, for instance, proved one of the igniting factors. The struggle that followed was not impervious to changes that came on their own after unremitting and conclusive struggles. Then the unbounded enthusiasm and zeal thus released helped to change the face of countries as first rate powers, brimming with faith and optimism in organised manpower.

The struggle was guided of necessity by a blend of many weas and experience, a blend of liberal democracy with a streak of Fabian socialism, Soviet planning and industrialisation with blantant overtones against obscurantism. There was also an unavoidable ingredient of the faith of the majority in Indian culture and history as it was thought necessary to revitalize the sagging morale, vanishing self-respect and unity which centuries subjection had had indistinguishably made a parrrt of conciousness and also sunk to the depth of the subconscious.

The use of religion was not without precedent, the Europeans also had used it as a ready source of enthusasm in using its egaliterian elements in their treatment of the Jews, consigning them to ghettos, pogroms and later on to gas chambers, making them self-consciously exclusive,, only to find salvation and pride in their scripture as the "chosen people", awaiting their Messiah and the promised land.

In Indian movement also, there was its presence with not inconsiderable emphasis on culture, finding its imagery, vocabulary and imaginative cast in myth, with streaks of xenophobia. This was overdone in that even caste-rigidity, child marriage and suttee were gloated over by the zealots. All this did throw up its alter-ego in evincing distrust at the inadvertant use of such indiginous elements by individuals schooled no less in the European traditions that had inspired Indian intellectuals despite a love-hate relationship.

The division of India brought in its wake a communal holocaust. In the frenzy unleashed, neighbourliness, friendly relations, and other values lost their warmth and sanctity, and all without

exception was sacrificed at the alter of hate and distrust. Brotherhood of man, reverence and regard for womanhood were cast to winds much to the stultification and discomfiture of religion to which mobs, run amuck, owned their allegiance. Brute, if brute really is such, was on the rampage, red in claw and tooth. This traumatic experience on so astounding a scale, too, sunk in the subconscious of the sub-continent. The switch back to medieval with hunting, lynching, punishing apostasies, heresies, feuds culminating in vendetta, paled into insignificance. Incidentally, in the present manifestation, this outburst, archetypal in its primitive ferocity, was adduced to withholding genuine outlet to mounting aggression against the foreign oppressor who, not content with causing demoralisation, was driving a wedge between the communities, much needed for their continuance.

This notwithstanding, the thing remains that idealism and optimism of different persuasions were the key notes and the people participated in millions to make their dreams come true, no apathy and fickleness born of indifference had appeared to scotch the dream; ultimately bringing into being the Freedom at Midnight' with its 'Midnight Children'.

The Augean stables of poverty, illiteracy, and social backwardness were to be cleared; a colossal project but to be implemented in our own way, eschewing the inhuman and coercive path that some other country, in more or less similar conditions, pursued. It was necessary to draw upon the experience, culled from different sources with a new wave of enthusiasm, tainted though with a 'night-bitten dawn' (*shab guzidah sahar*).

There came the plans and understandably the mixed economy, and also the quest for national integration, as the 'tryst with destiny' was not merely flaunting borrowed plumes, but living and carrying out a unique experience of drawing the masses into the vortex of social, political and economic transformation, the entire masses. The appropriate mantras and the electrifying timely slogans mobilised the entire populace to bring about cherished dream earlier, and to bring about practical change in economy and in so

big a country it needed an expert economist, a general planner, above all the politicians to make the people believe that they really participated as the real architects.

Politicians, approach boils down to holding out promises as to what their party could do if it was returned to power, and once in power, to getting entangled in organisational procedures, strategies, tactics and its own labrynth; the ultimate aim being relegated to indefinite future. Then the forgotten promises are repeated and statistics is manipulated showing that promises have been made good, much to the astonishment of the common man who is simply aroused, moved and panicked only to be made use of for private and public ends of the politicians. This actual manipulation as a tool and the make-believe participation make for a neurotic and a self-destructive personality to be satisfied in substitutes, however, fake, and excitements, of whatever sort, as meaningful participation for creating values altogether precluded. A pragmatic, unthinking, unethical massman, prey to now anonymous and then to overt authority, results.

An effective leadership was finally opted for which, in identity with the radical circles, was committed to the upliftment of the masses, taking the cue from the notion that exploitation and the exploitor may use any manner of exclusive fervor that suits its ends, essentially predatory and ravenous in nature. Our peasantry and the exploited classes in general had far early found a common cause, and with the growing conviction went whole hog with its programmes and struggles.

Here in Kashmir, the uniqueness of a new awakening did not grow in a vacuum. It was already in the germ. There existed far back in Kashmir's history the precedent of minorities enjoying the pride of place as councillors, generals, court poets, literary figures with the indigenous rulers as well as in the Pathan, Sikh and Mughal rule, living in peace in consonance with the level of the society and culture. The atmosphere of amity and brotherhood was strengthened and extolled into a standard of virtue by the long tradition of the Rishi order and the sufis who emphasised the

one common divine source and exposed to ridicule the sanctimony and hypocrisy of those who sought to divide.

The radical element on the new awakening, too, had manifested in Kashmir in several forms and made its political condition in Kashmir, a considerable role was played by the radical strand in Indian politics which in its turn had been influenced not only by the giant strides taken by the socialist countries in people-oriented economy and industry and also calling a final halt to the onrush of fascism and Nazism. The influence opened much wider vistas and imagination before Kashmir politics which made economic freedom and the political one as interdependent and worthy of realization.

Soon after 1947, the landless peasant became the master of his land and was helped to get rid of the centuries old subjection and inconceivable poverty. In a sense, the radical sections in India could count it as an alimentary realisation of their vision and a harbinger of such a possibility there. But could other social interests be reconciled to this change?

The culminating solitary struggle against the feudal system was felt to be too sweeping a change in the Indian context and also against some elements in the welter of Indian nation the scions of the ex-maharajas were also figuring in the Indian polity. The resentment within the state, numerically very small though, being aided and abetted from outside the state, started the beginning of distrust and the harrowing jig-saw puzzle which seemed impossible of a solution. The incomprehensible element in the mind-boggling volte face is the unavoidable impression that the radical element seemed to have lost all fight in them and not only let the things be, but willy nilly became the accomplice. It could be a projection and self defensive mechanism for the non-radical, but the radical elements, once dragged into it, on the plea of national integration, saw the nigger under every wood pile and an apparition behind every bush.

Further, the debut of Kashmir politics from its initial narrow confines into a wider expanse of Indian panorama had something

like the interpenetration and the feel that an infant gets in contact with its mother, or whosoever takes the motherly care of him, a sense of merger and an indistinguishable unity, very much conducive to confidence which leads ultimately to growth, individuation and maturity. But this individuation and measure of physical independence is misjudged by the possessive mother as separation and confrontation, probably its own insecurity in relation to past unconscious fears. The possessive attitude actually wants conformity, that deceptive sameness and uniformity giving a reassuring look of stability, progress and absence of strife, but ultimately bringing into being an initiativeless thoroughly dependent emotional and mental make up. So this growth and individuation began to be looked askance; a thing to be given up under an imperceptible duress at first, but later on to be suspected and persecuted by a hole and corner technique which makes the erstwhile blue-eyed boy touchy and defensive, simply because all that he does is not taken kindly to and liked. This seems to confirm the persecutor in what he chooses to believe, with a hint of plausibility to those who question the unnatural treatment as also to allay the conscience-pricks that raise their head. They want him to walk all right and conduct himself well, the critical minds are told, but at the same time see to it that he should get a slip or else they would not be able to fix him in his aberration.

Then followed a period of confrontation and ill will which in an atmosphere of bitterness made everything look topsy turvy and turned everything foul into fair and fair into foul, lending credibility to mud-slinging, to alternative views put forward earlier and now getting a new lease of life by those who were dead set against the relation, and all this led to incarceration and trials over a long period of time. Meanwhile all the adventurers, time-servers and all those who had to settle old scores became more loyal than the king. The idealism, romance, fervour and ethics became dowdy, shabby and too cramping, to be only derided and cast off. Faith and devotion in sustained hard work and integrity became to be deemed as encumbrances and hobbles in the race for power and pelf. You

had not to prove your credentials in terms of expertise, capability, and long-term mental and financial equipment for a slow but steady investment in a future, but in short cuts in success attainable. Loyalty and unfaltering yes-manship and acquiescence to keep wagging your tail in liking and taking the spill overs. Thus came into being a man who was thoroughly intractable, not amenable to normal and matter-of-fact influences as prolonged confidence tricks and infructuousness of well-meant efforts had produced a warped personality, the butt of ridicule, victim to all venomous shafts that are aimed at one who you choose to hate and subdue in spirit.

Since this prolonged state of affairs was giving dubious dividends, old memories began to be felt with some acuteness and urgency as things were getting out of hand.

The old skein had to be unravelled and torn threads to be joined a new. Here was an opportunity to clear the breasts, to understand the "difference" aright, not as confrontation but as a desirable component. But again it took the form of cutting something to size and reminding of your smallness to make you behave. Then again the see-saw of allowing to be put into power and destabilising because the identity element was apprehended to be the unpredictable dark horse to be broken in and tamed to carry other goods also and allow other drivers to hold the reins to be free of suspicion.

All this trying and traumatic experience was sought to be made bearable right from the moment the distrust and illwill got pronounced by "*shabi shalemaars*" and "*jashni Kashmirs*", and the 'pearl eyed parrot' in the golden cage continued in its strains the refrain: "Thou art, thou alone art" which regaled some in the belief that they really *were* and also assuaged the pain of many in uncertainty by the anodyne of whatever sort. "The Bitch Goddess of success" continued to be given the bonees and praised in songs.

And to let off the steam, in the stadiums and gymnassium, a whole host of 'player' and 'sportsmen' were bred, reminiscent of old Roman amphitheatres, necessary to prevent restiveness. And this worked too. And you could see long and unterminable queues

and crowds listening to commentaries, even for nights, very much liked and envied by the string-pullers of this harlequinade to throw people off the scent and to cook things uninterfered and also the present people as nonthinking and non-feeling a lot to be swayed by anything, provided they got fever and excitement, in effect to be reducible to biddable entities, even if they showed different allegiances. This delusion, and the tolls it took later on, that no sensible and right-thinking dispensation could opt for, had to recoil, but they never knew.

Now let us see how all this gets reflected in the anguished soul of the common man as the short stories of the second phase reveal.

He was seismographically sensitive to all that was happening around him. Like all sensitive feeling and thinking individuals he, no doubt, withdrew in part to himself face to face against unsurmountable odds of apathy, ill will, many such frozen layers of dead weight, with the difference that awareness did not take leave of him. True, he did not lapse into slogan mongering or take to acrimonious protests because his art thus would not remain art, nor would it afford a peep into the soul of the common man, his anguish, festering sore, unrequitted love and his implicit craving and aspiration.

Amin Kamil, in his "Infernal Creature", beautifully describes the changed circumstances and the now new anonymous shroud-thief unrelievedly more heinous against the relief of old Gana Mokul who did despoil the dead bodies of the shroud but did not leave the dead bodies exposed for all to see. Then the insight into mass-psychology, how a moral malady grown common, becomes a sort of customs and ritual, almost acceptable like proper customs in something of a prognosis, unmasked the victims of the shroudtheft would let a casual wayfarer know:

"We were at the grave."

"Has that been robbed?"

"The grave gives you to understand that."

"Let the hell take him."

These four sentences with a syllable or word not more or less

would be spoken much like a ritual of bathing, burying and reciting various funeral prayers and then hurling abominative curses to the new shroud-thief. The culminative contrast is "There is not another man to be found like Gana Mokul, "There is much more in this 'Zwaji Pathri' than meets the eye.

The story "What Matters is the Head" describes again a dispute between two Thanadaars over a corpse for investigation. It is necessary, therefore, to show unmistakeably towards which side the head of the corpse points to lying as the corpse does on the demarcation line between two 'thaanas'. The technicality and the general forensic procedure, thus, takes the pride of place, relating the case in point to oblivion. In this wrangle over technical niceties as to who will have the upper hand in appropriating the corpse and the jurisdictional right, the by stander is bewildered and finally he asks for the final resolution of the case as to what is to be done with a vast jurisdiction and not one like the ramshackle of a 'scavengers hut' at Khanpore, where never do well rickety constables he had got flogged by his sepoy, as they had tried to turn the head of the corpse towards their side, replies, "*sadne do ji* (let it rot), what matters really is towards which side was the head lying. So long as this is not resolved, the matter will linger on as it is". The story reminds one of Tolstoy's novelette '*The Death of Ivan Ilyich*', in which the doctors, instead of attending to the illness of the ailing man, wrangles over the rightness or otherwise of the diagnosis much to the exacerbation and ultimate demise of the patient. The dying man in the course of 'treatment' is reminded of his inauthentic self as used to give judgment to the accused unmindful of what that meant to them.

Akhtar Mohi-ud-Din in his 'The Love Story of Madanvaar and Padmaan', shows the intensity and seriousness of their love and their pledge to live it up, keeping the torch of their love aflame and bright as it faces the fiercely raging storm of the different truth-perceptions of their fathers. Then in the loftiness of their love as from heights, they perceive that though truth-trees of their father strike and dress each other down with their branches, the

different truth-trees had a common root. They feel pleased and promise to let their fathers know that the truth-trees had a common root, informing them if they strike at the common root the trees will come crashing down. They, however, with the passage of time see no need to guard the flame of their love against the storm as it abates. Instead, with the coldness in their relations setting in, they imperceptibly begin to own different truth-perceptions of their fathers, pulling their children in the contrary directions till Madanvaar and Padmaan die disconsolate one after the other. It is neither a traditional nor a photographic representation but an eye-opener to our own plight; how, in spite of awareness being there, it is not lived up to its logical conclusion, notwithstanding the awareness presenting time and again people relapsing into what they had striven so hard to get released from. This is true of men and situations when awareness and safeguarding the values that matter are abdicated for soporific routine, where, through sheer boredom and ennui, there is complete reversal of values, much to the distress in which human situation gets inter-twined and choked.

In Akhtar's another story, 'Thou Art, Thou Alone Art', he is acutely sensitive to the atmosphere pervading many last decades. He succinctly and eloquently represents the onset of despondency after the intoxicating optimism and initial giddiness of success prove illusory. This phase, he feels, repeats age after age and each time the illusory success recoils, making men feel that they felt short of their inner reserve tries to see 'on the other side of the wall' as a dim perception. In this dim perception of 'what is on the other side of the wall? 'and' 'what died then when there was nothing? after blood trickled down the skies when he as Nimrod had thrown a sling to the skies, he very graphically presents the lucid intervals in human life situation when 'darkness unmitigated' is relieved by a shade of light.

A tremendously big show is being enacted on this as well as the other side of the wall. Age after age, I grow a new skin like a serpent, and doing again what I had tired myself of doing in the ages gone by. In each new life, I

believed in good faith that I had done something entirely new, so novel that I had never done before. In every age, I threw a sling to the skies and struck my head against the lamp post, recognising in every age the only colour which according to my lights is the crown of all colours... the darkness.

The indistinct perception of the other side of the wall has happening all along as one system gives way to another, and one vision is supplanted by the other. There is a necessity of weaving of myth if one is to live and not to lose heart in this endless desert where your feet are rewarded by blisters. The wayfarer has to find a meaning if only to retain a semblance of sanity. Myth is not just fiction but a great energiser, and by the feel of wholeness that it gives to a limited being, it drags him on to new constructions and new visions, only to reveal that we have run aground getting soreheaded. It is a negative teacher because it every time, after initial optimism, reveals to be vulnerable and limited. But does man learn?

Hari Krishan Koul in his "Remorse Let Loose" reflects the first flush of optimism and zeal have petered out. The very names, Pedro, Doctor, Saith and Tarzon are far removed from the rootedness as mere labels and make believes, probably the titles seeming more real than the reality. The very attachments keeping them in contact with reality seem encumbrances and the very 'august' events taking place in the guise of very remote and abstract happenings only fit to be carried on as mere lifeless formalities to be made fun of and scoffed at. How can these simulacra fill their void but in listening to the scores in cricket even when they are carrying the pall of Pedro's mother? The shopkeeper remonstrating against this unconscionable behaviour evokes a rejoinder that if the dead was not late all these seventy years, how will these ten minutes matter. This behaviour on their part scandalises Pedro and the priest all the more when at long last they cry out while carrying the dead body, "Three have fallen!" and the priest understood it to mean that the dead body had fallen down thrice

an ominous foreboding. While the dead body is burning on the pyre, they talk of their imaginary love affairs and all the rot. Then the ultimate remorse, burst in Tarzan at a farther corner, when his pals think him to have whisked away to the cinema show which they had intended in case the funeral come to an early end, is a pointer that this sort not in remote unforeseeable future might come booming with gun only to get out of this futile existence to get an impression that they really live.

Koul's "Profound picture" portrays how a common man having finally been given to understand that he does not matter as precluded from any participation whatsoever, is rendered apathetic and indifferent to matters that affect them virtually. he may deliver fun at the circus jokers' trousers slipping out of his legs, but as if with a vengeance surprisingly impervious to many things he is bereaved and denuded of by the circumstances imposed on him without his knowing. His apathy and silence are perhaps desirable because if people give tongue to what they feel that might ignite gun powder and explosives the shape that the misdeeds of the perpetrators of the miseries assume. Then presuming that the worst is over, the newly won freedom entails how this is to be preserved and achieved. This as utopia is projected like a prophecy into an indefinite future ever more receding even when you are coaxed to move on and on. The 'Devi's temple vanishes behind new chinara tree of which countless many are left behind without your getting anywhere.

Finally, the man with the white shirt and pajama cannot make out who the villain in the picture is, father or father-in-law or the maternal uncle of the hero or the heroine, and this intractability and incomprehensibility make the picture 'profound'. The man who was to read the paper, prepared over a long period of time and attend the seminar, who at long last was getting an opportunity to avail himself of the things that mattered and made him 'estimable', might well exhort the 'eunuchs' and those who laugh at the circus joker's pants slipping off his legs are woefully ignorant of things stripped naked of their very being. Will they ever be undeceived?

In his "An Offensive Tale", the very undoing of academic world is depicted in the student community being made use of for nefarious and paltry ends. The poor professor, over wrought by the circumstances, forgets to wear his pants. This poor man overwhelmed by the misery, tries to console himself with similar and far more serious transgressions of other professor and the Boss himself. Wanting to enlist the support of students to break the encirclement of his colleagues, who in collusion with the Boss are hell bent on starting the investigation in the presence of the Hon'ble Minister. His very effort reveals to him how they too have their fingers in the pie in grabbing of the college funds, the embezzlement and misuse of which he wants to make them aware of. The bathos and anticlimax make the professor feel that he is picked on alone, when the real crimes leave the 'tactful' people unscathed. He feels that he might give up his ghost there on that very chair, waiting for the period to end only after seven minutes when the Boss would start the investigation.

Then what is one to do in the pervading gloom, overwhelming misery, futility, and hopeless dejection? The Swamiji in Koul's "It is Night Yet", would have us believe that the biting, piercing cold, snowstorms, torrential rains, avalanches that overtook the three people staying at the tourist hut at Banihal after having undergone more horrendous experience, is mere *maaya* or like a dream, which when up, is no longer real. Perhaps this approach also seems a way out when the anguish of the real situation is so excruciatingly painful that it can only be borne by benumbing the pain, by a soporific if need be, and make one move again by a dreamer an ideal, however remote and unattainable, lest one altogether freezes. But the morning, when the *maayaa* will be over, is faraway and 'it is night yet' and the hair raising experience is to be put up with.

Hraday Koul Bharti raises up all the Kafkaesque experience in man in general driven to corner by hopeless situation. The individual rendered desperate and ineffectual would not stop short of dealing death to others if he could, and debarred from this, becomes self-destructive with a morbid mentality of treasuring

cobwebs, poison, thorns, aversion to sunlight, the very things symbolically inimical to life affirmation. In his "Crown of Creation", a present of cobweb is made by the man to his spouse. Here the thorns used to make crowns, the poison derived from the cactus, on whose leaves feed the scorpions, have their customers both for taking themselves and serving to others. The spouse cautions her man against the 'chipkali' (the lizard) as it stings a man after two and a half 'garhis' (a measure of time). The man reassures her that he would also sting it back as he would also be reminded of his own nature in the same measure of time. Now, whose two 'and a half 'gharis' will end first? His spouse apprehends that the 'chipkali's' two and a half gharis will end first and thus would sting first. The man sets her fears at rest that he would take to swindle in setting the watch back, which the 'chipkali' would not be able to do as it is not the 'Crown of Creation' like him. This perverse pleasure and gloating over the capacity of doing what even the poisonous reptiles would not do is the hall-mark of The Crown of Creation, ironical though, so unhinged and set awry by the situation.

Further more, the man reaching of the end of his inner reserves at the end of his tether, has a feel that the world will end as it will be a 'Sunless Tomorrow'. The individuals undergo a metamorphosis with the fear of the sunless tomorrow, his skin turning into animal hide with ridges bristling with monkey-like fur. As he comes to himself after the swoon, he finds himself in a queer room where there are pages pasted to one another edge to edge, all pallid and tainted with blue blotches. The wall is made of the pages of history, some of which are straight and others upside down, still others askew and awry. There is a crack all along the paper-wall and the writing there is altogether faded. "The crack there on the wall is due to our mistake. We should have taken thought before hand that they will not bear sunlight. We should not have used these pages at all. They are the pages of history from the beginning of time. "They enclose him and he probably is what history has made him enclosed as he is in the room made of

them. The doctors holding him on the operation-table have nothing like human in them, "bare skeletons in attire", nothing save their bald scalps is visible under the full blaze of six lamps which give more heat than light. The doctors are cold as ice with lime stone as their colour. They ask him to shriek out in order to be rid of his painful existence.

All the four raised a furor and cried out of fear...I cry out... aaaa, aaaa. My cry continues still, continues even today. I do not lose my breath and the cry does not come to an end. Now the cry turns by and by into a monkey howl and my skin gradually turns into a hide wrinkling out on the ridges of which there is a dense hairy growth. The paperwall is now riddled with countless blue blotches... Outside, perhaps, that tomorrow has come, that 'tomorrow' that will see no sun...

The ever recurring theme of everybody bearing his own cross and the checkmate one gets in irresolvable situation, is presented in "Chakra Vyuh". The man plunges into a battle of life making a dent in every wall and gate, is caught in a situation of his own making or is existing there as such, must know how to pull out to come out a victor as the master of this technique of warfare was supposed to do. The hope of somebody bailing him out is more often than not precluded, making him, for all practical purposes, an expendable entity.

Mohammad Bin Ishaq Bin Ali's racket standing above the native racket hung on the nail over the wall and Abhimanyu holding up a chariot wheel poised for being hurled at Kaurou spearman soldier stand unattested like a petrified moment on the wall of the room, irrespective of the fact that Mohammad Bin Ishaq Bin Ali and his party have long before besieged in Biafra and that Daryodhana's son has long long back crashed Abhimayu's skull ending that day of Mahabhart. But the racket there on the wall, absorbing all the smoke, the blue-print for effecting a blend of Nigerian and Indian architecture in the brief case, and Abhimanyu still holding up the chariot wheel on his mighty arms that have not suffered the least

bend stand there on the wall, like a painful situation, not thawing in being congealed there as a reality of the moment, with all the trails and tribulations of uncertainty giving an impression that 'his Turn' has also come without so much as crossing the first gate of the 'Chakravyuh'.

A.K.Rahbar presents the present-day Gautam setting out on his mission in Bharatvarsha. His father, a big mill-owner, wants him to take over proprietorship of the mills and establish 'Gautam Nagar' or alternatively fight an election in a Harijan settlement and become a minister in the long run. All the plans of the father fall short of realisation because of the lockout in the mills and Harijans choosing a candidate in their own fraternity. Gautam, not succumbing to temptations, leaves his Yashumat to wander over the country where, in course of his wanderings, sees poor hungry people swooping upon crabs and cast off remnants and dredging them from out of gutters, adulterated goods, mothers not suckling their young ones, for the fear that it is contaminated and poisoned, long and interminable queues of unemployed youth with no gleam of life in their eyes, evoking the anguished cry 'Verily, this *sansaar* is an abode of misery.' His undiminished love for 'Yashu' also might not be suckling his babe. Then one day, in the midst of such absorptions, he gets a telegram: 'Dear Gautam, Live Long! May your mission succeed. I pray for you. Do not worry at all for me. I have married the Mill-Manager.'

Today's Yashu will pray for the success of her Gautam's mission, but instead of waiting for him and feeling heartened in the pilgrimage of spirit as his '*ardhaangani*' prefers the Mill-Manager as the bird in hand rather than the two in the bush.

Rattan Lal Shant, in his "The First Lesson", shows the teacher who after a long wandering, resolves to bring life and hope to the neglected and forsaken region where he is sent as a teacher to join in a school. The first thing he confronts there is a coffin surrounded by a group of people. The man conducting him to the place tells him after the day wears to a close, 'How could they start a school here, Sir? There should be children of school going

age for that. Six years have passed since the Pir Sahib of that hill over there got incensed with the people of below fifteen twelve years of age... the only child who was ready there was put in the coffin today." No comment perhaps is needed in view of the absence of such children and hopelessness that has caught on the people.

Shant's another story, "whom should I talk of" talks of the grudge which the old generation nurses to the younger one, the growing irksomeness if not the irrelevance of their values and restrictions. The new generation is embittered for having carved out their own values in a world where circumstances force them to conform to patterns in a society cramping their life. They simply have to keep up with the society, with, its fake, artificial, and ad hoc standards. The old generation grouse that the present generation is not adhering to their values, the new one remonstrates that they owe nothing to them for they had no choice in being condemned to this sort of life rendered helpless; they recklessly expose themselves and others and in laughing under their sleeves.

What shall he cherish and value?

"The sustaining aliment?" Its search being a siren call from across the desert, only waylaying him..." "his breaths?" He has been giving an account of them, ever since he began to take them...

"His life?" Was it given to him on his asking? May be he might not have liked to be born yet.

"His society?" Its Mona Lisa smile was ever an enigma to him.

All along his life, he has been trying to fit himself to its measure, now falling short and then brimming over its confines.

The Narga they were supposed to be afraid of is in fact that in which they have been caught and where they have lost their way.

Then, the solitary character in Ali Mohd Lone's story, "Vacuum" is so enveloped in vacuum that he would give away anything to get his vacuum filled in. He had found no answer to the problem of

being and is so overwrought that the whole universe seems to have shrunk to even less than an atom. The problem with him is unlike those that we have confronted so far.

People in general manage somehow to plod, the very chains of business, confines of household and such other things tame and domesticate them. But the central character in "Vacuum" is free from such chains, and as such, finds himself alone. Nobody is there to communicate with in the noisy solitude. In his painful loneliness and lack of communication, he does not find any difference even in being hospitalised on account of a fracture, he takes it as an opportunity, a luxury, a romance in being different from the meaningless rounds of daily activity. The fact that the X-rays do not show any fracture disgusts him as he is thus denied the opportunity of sitting on a hospital bed with arms curbed under plaster.

This phase is very much like the 'petrified moment on the wall' in Bharti's "Chakravyuha", and the metamorphosed being in his "Sunless Tomorrow", who through sheer frightening prospect of such a tomorrow is reduced to this state, perhaps giving out his interminable shriek because he cannot locate this trouble in the general malaise where the new anonymous 'shroud-thief' (in Kamil's story) not only despoils the dead bodies but exposes them besides to public gaze, or where the common man is beguiled by the circus joker's pants slipping out of his legs, unaware of how many things he is denuded of and not being able to know who the villain is, wheather the hero or the heroine's father or father-in-law or her maternal uncle in H.K.Koul's "The Profound Picture". This state of mind is really the painful dilemma before a thinking and feeling man who, as the founts of life dry up in him, sees no way out in an authentic perception of life, but only in abdicating his self and surrendering before a father-figure of authority.

To conclude, the Savage, in Bharti's story, even after twenty years' absence on home coming, is still happy over the sunlight getting bruised and sullied as it crawls up warily over the cracks and pits on the wall, and finally expecting it to be irretrievably

trapped in the tough and strong cobweb.

His spouse asks him, have you ever thought of sunlight also?

'Why not?

'What?' she asked as I pointed to the cobweb in the corner.

The sunlight was about to swallow the bait. She swooped upon the cobweb with a single pull and, turning to me in guise of a gigantic being, held me in a tight embrace. Her warmth got the better of my iciness... Gradually, all the cracks got filled and all the pits played out and the sunlight flexed itself on the smooth soft glossy surface unobstructed.

The savage, cold and indifferent as he had returned even after twenty years, got accustomed to it. Even his illness, showing no signs of thawing, is asked about, but he replies that he is accustomed to it. His illness could only be got over by love. To be reminded of the past mistakes, if ever they occurred, is only to fix him in his perversity, for which he cannot be solely responsible for he has been at the receiving end also. It is love, a loving concern, to take cognizance and, in the long run, accustoming him to it. If in making him what he is, he only is not to blame, much more so in this spiritual rehabilitation, he alone is not to see peace, but the other party should reach out in constructive cure and loving concern.

The love needed is not the love of the possessive and insecure mothers who take every sign of life, every hint of precocity to be unreliable, necessitating curbs and restrictions that make for stunted and abnormal development ultimately, nor that Delilah like love which destroys the very strength, the very unique affirmative quality that identity possesses, to simply tame and domesticate, but love which marks him out. It is only that trust, that abiding free flow of life that ensures unity rather than smothering incorporation. What is needed is a whole man, rather than a big man, to conquer in spirit and love. An understanding and imaginative grasp to recognise him, entertaining the hope that the 'ray of hope' is still there undiminished in its brightness, uniqueness to be affirmed rather than smallness to be derided — that is the love that is needed

because the whole man not only thinks, but feels and loves too. What is needed is to rise above petty calculations and the craze for lumping up of individuals and disparate entities for a generalists convenience, even when there is no need for it. It is this language of the heart and soul that the short story writer and the artist in him use and insist on being felt and understood as reciprocity in love.

M. Siddiq Beig

The Red Silken Pajamas

Akhtar Mohi-ud-Din

Nabir Shaala was already well over three score and ten. For the most part of his life, he had darned and continued doing this even then. On the Jehlem bank, overlooking the river, he owned a small three storeyed wood planked shack of a house. He invariably sat on the verandah, working, wearing thick glasses fixed in place with twisted yarn, on his nose, shrilling out his favorite song: *mash bo chhivireevthas raati ke pyali hano* And sometimes another song: *tsininy poshi yangi me dyinthmas tan haa cah nono venyjes booji aalam* (I was boozed by the cup he offered me yesternight. I saw her peach coloured body, O, Do not tell anybody lest the world

should know of it.)

Right from his early childhood there was a slur in his speech and this lisping was all the more accentuated because of his toothlessness. He lisped like the one in early toddling childhood. His snow-white sparse beard showed on his face as if single hairs of pashminah wool spread out on his wife's garment hem. He worked on and on in spite of the tremor on his hands. Somehow he managed to eke out his living and his business ran passably well. All his customers recognised him to be an adept hand in his trade and, not without reason, felt convinced that the novices at the job would hold no candle to him.

Of all the things in the world he loved his humble dwelling and doted on his spouse. His spouse had been named Khotan Dyad. On evenings, she gently pressed his limbs and treated softly on his tired out body. She would set before warm and toothsome *batta* (cooked rice) and every now and then, arranged his *hookah*. As Nabir Shaala shrilly lisped away his songs on the verandah, his needle ran across the *rafal* (a kind of soft wool) shawl to mend its wounds. All the while, Khootan Dyad took her seat beside him picking spare hairs from pasham wool, working it with flour, and spinning on the wheel. Nabir Shaala would humorously tell her in his endearing lisp: "*bi gooshay wasti, chi geyham chaath*" (I am your master and you are my apprentice).

Khotan Dyad would partly reply, as in a huff, "*tsi kyaazi gookh wasti ti bi geyas tsaath, tsaath gokh tsi*" (why should you be the master and I your apprentice? No, it is you who are my apprentice).

Khootan Dyad had lost all but her one tooth in front. Her nether lip had got drawn inwards in the mouth and this solitary tooth stuck out like a nail. Her face was totally wrinkled like a dried shriveled turnip and her hair looked like a begrimed white sheet. She had stopped giving birth for the last twenty years. All through

her life, she had born ten issues; God had taken kindly to her as far as this goes, but none except her eldest and one in the middle had survived. The eldest daughter in her turn got her children married, and the other after the demise of her mother-in-law, was the mistress of her own house. They now lived alone in the humble dwelling, partaking of their own humble fare and living frugally but well. They had not faced any suffering or distress until then. True, they had incurred debts on account of their children's marriage, but somehow the debt had been paid off, slowly and gradually though. Her only inconsolable sorrow was why none of her sons had survived; how they had been born robust and strapping and how the evil eye took toll of them.

Nabir Shaala's wealth was much bruited about in the locality; he must have one to two thousand to say the least. But God alone knew what their plight was. Their meagre earnings allowed them a bare hand to mouth living.

That day too, Nabirr Shaala, with his thick glasses kept in place by the twisted yarn in his nose, was darning his rafal shawl and giving tongue to his song: *mash bo cheevnash yaati ke pyaali hano*, and Khotan Dyad, seated beside him, was intoning the same song in step with him. There was muddy water flowing down the Jehlum, apparently it had rained in the Maraaz (southern Kashmir). The city had not witnessed a rain for long and it was very hot. One felt reluctant to work. But how could a lone bread-earner avoid working! You had to work whether you liked it or not.

It was growing increasingly clear on Nabir Shaala that the silken thread that passed the eye of the needle was for sooth the blood of his eyes that went into darning the customers' garments. He was drenched through and through in sweat, and how he abhorred the rafal shawl on his knees! It was so hot already and on top of it unbearably so with the burden on the knees. But there was no turning back. To assuage and forget to some extent this misery,

and partly because of the habit, he mouthed the song: *mush bi cheevthas yaati ke pyaali hano...*

At long last, he completed the darning of the rafal shawl and had to trim the overhanging threads. He began to fumble for his scissors, but did not come by it. Perforce he asked his wife in his peculiar lisp, "Where are the scissors?"

"I have kept it in its proper place." Khotan Dyad replied. "Will you please fetch it here? Why did you keep it there?"

It was quite a task for Khotan Dyad to get up. Her legs were rheumatic and she could not move about given a choice, she would not get up for life. But her husband had to be obeyed. She could never say 'no' to him. Much to her discomfort and naggingly she got up to look for the scissors. She could not find it on the shelf, in the small tin box, she found it neither. On his part, Nabir Shaala felt compellingly avid to finish it up and then sit relaxed and free. He cried to her in his lisp, "Look sharp and find it out."

"I am searching for it, you see." Khotan Dyad rejoined. So saying, she brought down from a shelf overhead a bundle of clothes. The bundle contained old used up garments and clothings of her dead children. Of children who could no longer wear them. Her heart began to sink. The pathetic feeling of those robust children having been born and then devoured by the evil eye. As she ruminated and turned over the events, many ideas kept coming to her mind. There came the reminiscences of her children in succession. She felt a sucking sensation in her shrivelled up breasts. Amidst this, she caught sight of a red garment. At this she missed her beat as if she felt a wrench at her heart by a hundred hands. This was a red silken pair of trousers. This alone had remained of her trousers of her bridal outfit. This aroused memories of her youth. She blushed. For her part, she had tried hard to keep it from her

husband's view, but the glaring redness could not be concealed, and it blatantly and obtrusively clamoured itself. Khotan Dyad grew scarlet with shame. A trepidation shook her frame like that of a maiden as if she was the bride and Nabir Shaala her bridegroom.

It looked as if her bridal female escort had just left her upstairs and she was alone for the first time with Nabir Shaala, feasting his eyes on her as she stole a look on him from her downcast eyes and giving tongue to his favourite song in his lisp:

*Chininy pooshi yangi me dyinthmas tan
haa chi no depyzyas booji aalam*

To Khotan Dyad's mind's eyes, Nabir Shaala assumed a youth's aspect, attired in a 'alpak pheran', a 'dusa' (a double shawl) slung over his shoulders and turband with 972 malmal, as though he had just dismounted the horse and she had likewise got up from her bridal seat, coy with her head bent down, harbouring many a foolish fancy, dreading and all atremble, "How shall I muster courage if he asks me to talk. How shy I shall be!"

It seemed to her Nabir Shaala was talking, and she did hear it with selfame ears in peculiar lisp:

"Tayay yaag ye jaayi"
(Do please put on trousers)

Shame overtook her. She pretended not to hear. What on earth could she say to him?

Nabir Shaala pestered her again: "*Yaagi!*" (Do put it on.)

He removed his rafal shawl off his knees and the 'dusa', too, from his shoulders and approached Khaaton Dyad, "Do put it on, please."

"*tse chhay vath dejmits!*" (Your mind has been set awry), said she like a maiden with a flounce.

“Why on earth has my mind been set awry?” He expostulated. Khotan Dyad felt silent. She could not get up, nay, she could not even lift up her, no question of getting up.

“*achha ma yaag!*” (Well, don’t wear it!)

So saying, Nabir Shaala got up, left the door for downstairs. Khotan Dyad heaved a sigh of relief. She hastened to pack up the bundle. She cast her look again and again on the red silken trousers and felt an eagerness to put it on, but could not do it for shame. At last she put it underneath all the clothings and hid it from sight on the shelf.

Now she began to look around as to where Nabir Shaala went. Where after all did he leave to so suddenly?

In the inner recesses of her heart, she did not like him to leave the room this very time. Ashamed though she was, she would have liked him to force her into putting on the trousers.

It took Nabir Shaala ages to return. With the sound of the door opening, he entered, singing: “*haa chi no depyzes booji aalam chinint pooshi yangi me....*”

Khotan Dyad felt scared and afraid again. She, God knows why, again got haunted by the red silken trousers and waxed crimson. She was asking herself “Would she be able to bring herself to wear the trousers if he importuned... Would she do it or not... what a shame it would be!”

Nabir Shaala went upto the attic and left beside Khotan Dyad a ‘paav’ (a measure by weight, about one fourth of a Kg.) of fatty mutton, wrapped in paper and asked her, “*yooogthay yee jaayi?*” (Did you put on the trousers?) “What a creature you are not to agree at all everytime!”

“Fie! You dont have any shame at all.”

“What shame should there be between a man and his wife?”

"Well, What would you like to be done ot this mutton?"

"Cooking,what else?"

Khotan dyad was quite mindfull of her teath;she had but one tooth,and Nabir shalla lacked even that. What would they eat it with? Nabir Shalla,alive at that,told her,"Give it a long simmering.It is long since we have taken any meat. Now get up and put on the trousers....will you get up?....Do please."

Like a small child,he importuned. Khotan Dyad,not agreeable to it and he, insistently pestering! At long last, it was decided that he would quit the room, and only then would she put that on.

Nabir Shala took the paav of mutton down staires. Khotan Dyad got up and bolted the door securely from inside. Shamefacedly she neared the shelf, unpacked the bundle ran into the trousers,and slipped her legs into it.

With the trembling and pounding of the heart, she also went downstaires.Strangely enough, she felt no pain in her legs as she went down the flight of the stairs. She no longer remembered her rheumatic lower limbs.She only thought of how she would be able to look at him in the face."Ho unseemly if somebody noticed us, man and wife!Oh God!"This prospect made her heart sink.

Treading softly, she entered the kitchen. Nabir Shaala sat there at the oven by turns blowing at the fire and singing. He had set the pav of the meat for simmering and the oven was all ablaze.

As the Khotan Dyad stealthly and softly moved to avoid Nabir Shaala's gaze till she would sit, without being aware of it, she tripped up her great toe of her foot in the cord of the mat and fell down flat face for wards. Nabir Shaala gave a start.He saw her lying prostrate like a wild bird. Feeling apprehensive, he gave a shriek, but soon she lifted her profile up, cast a winsome smile on Nabir Shaala and he,holding her arms,asked her while trying to lift her up,"*Yoguy may Kyenh*,"(You did not hurt yourself?)

Khotan Dyad told him that she had not, while her eyes were still downcast.

“Now, get up, will you!”

She took her head which was still lowered. Nabir Shaala insisted pertinaciously that stand up she must. Khotan Dyad obstinately declined. He was all out for pulling her up. They even relapsed into obscenities and ribaldries like a newly wedded young couple.

Khotan Dyad, too, became oblivious to the fact that she was a mother of married children and a grandmother too. Nabir Shaala on his part was quite dead to the fact that even his son-in-law was an old man.

In this exchange of ribaldries, they forgot the hole world; Nabir Shaala pulling her by the arm, while she sat tight. He pulled her at the hem of the pheran and up at the shoulders only to see her stand up.

There was a knock at the door and somebody gave a cough. He composed himself with some haste to give an impression that he was doing no wrong, and the Khotan Dyad felt absolutely mortified.

It was their elder daughter's husband in the corridor witnessing all this and biting his lips in the chagrin.

Nabir Shaala said, “Asalaam Alaikum, come in please.” But his son-in-law did not wish him back and left the room stung to the quick.

Khotan Dyad felt completely crestfallen and ashamed, as if she had been caught red handed. She cast her guilty look at the Nabir Shaala, who pounced upon her saying, “We are not convicted of any felony! Everybody is a king unto himself in his domain.

Thou Art, Thou Alone Art

Akhtar Mohi-ud-Din

It is now that my vision is getting clear. Not that I discern anything, or that I get a feel of anything palpable, but assuredly, not that darkness which terrified, that led you astray; something like a perception that there is somebody on the other side of the wall, or something breathing "yahoo, yahoo" in and out.

Well, who or what can be there on the other side of the wall? How can I say! I still admit to my blindness.

My eyes even today perceive the darkness still in its undiminished state, but not altogether unrelieved by a feel of

witness. This very feeling overwhelms me or else would suffer soreheadedness still further.

I reminded of the heady wine of the intoxication when my hair was pitch black, when I felt the eagle within me poised with two flexed wings encircling the whole universe. Then this darkness seemed to me the envy of all colours. I then struck my head on any lamppost that vaunted it forth to others in the intoxicated lot or the blind, "I did away with him."

Nimrod, as he got piqued, took and threw the sling to the skies. They say that blood poured down the skies. An outcry rose, "It is dead, it is dead".

That Nimrod verily was I who threw the sling. That drugged one, too, was I who struck his head against the lamppost. it was the selfsame I who raised the outcry: "He is dead, he is dead." I raised the outcry in the good faith because I was witness to this death. But that terrifying darkness no longer remains which, besides led you astray. I now perceive on the other side of the wall.... but what after all?

I feel like giving a call, "Who is there on the other side of the wall?" But I am afraid, all the while that this very voice might ring back from the other side. I myself will feel helpless to say who I am. What on earth shall I say? How do I know who am I; I never had so keen a sight as to find myself and what if my query echoes from the other side, what will be there for me to say?

A blindish smile very likely might be playing on my lips because I relish keeping turning in my mind of my bygone days, and my brows might be tremulous with fear because I have come to regard those acts sinfull which I committed when I was Nimrod.

Gracing the throne of Egypt I stood loftier than all others. My reason has taught me that there is nothing like sky. I stood towering above all because the hills and mounds were far away. Then, as I gave a cry from the heights, "There is nothing save I," I felt that it

was my voice after traversing the whole universe reaching me back. I would then say to my courtiers," Do you understand how my voice, after traversing all there is, reaches me back had there been anything to impede it or standing in its way....."

My courtiers prostrating before the columns of my throne would say,"Verily, this is the truth. Thou art, thou alone art." Their acquiescence would make me believe and this belief strengthened still more when the parrot in the golden cage hummily intoned,"thou art thou alone art," The parrot's eyes were real pearls.

To tell the truth there was no need for me to throw a sling to the skies,because I was aware that the sky is a mirage in space. This notwithstanding. I threw the sling to the skies to bring home to not a few Abrahams that I could do even this.And then, for the first time, my brows were atremble when blood poured down from above....."If there was nothing there, what died then?"

I would fain wish those rivulets of blood issuing from the skies should stop pouring down. Waters of the Nile, made incarnadine turned the ridges and banks scarlet.It being gory all around, the trembling on my brows augmented still more. My brains pricked as if with thorns,"If there was nothing at all there, what died then?"

Believe me it is only since then that doubt assailed me that there is something on the other side of the wall. This something, who knows what is bleeding but alive, or who knows whether it is really bleeding. It is just likely that my eyes are jaundiced and things seem to them of a colour they are not.

Kings cannot afford to reveal their real thoughts.Nimrod could ill afford to take Abraham at his word. That is why I raised the cry that even if there were something, there remains nothing new. it was because of this that my pearl-eyed parrot repeatedly cried away:"Thou art, thou alone art"

Propaganda forces a tongue-tie on many Abrahams reminded of this, a smile might be playing on my lips that I had won that war. Abraham was at bay. Nobody had believed him, however much he had tried. I alone seemed to believe him, thinking to myself, "If there was nothing at all there, what died then?"

When I got a crypt made for myself. Sculptors from various countries came and began to fashion many designs of their workmanship. I yearned to secure for myself every possible comfort, so that no worm or insect could make its appearance there. I moreover wanted to make it sound-proof and I put such stone blocks in constructing it as resisted the heat of the blazing sun.

The artisans were all praise for my sagacity as the pearl-eyed parrot kept on crying: "Thou art, thou alone art!"

But within,, some fear was gnawing me. The worms and insects might attack if the grave gave away. Besides, if the grave was not sound proof, my wails might reach the ears of the wayfarers outside: the fear that hell-fire might make the stones hot, prompted me to make a fortress of the crypt. The fear had made its appearance from the very day when I had thrown the sling to the skies and the blood had poured down." If there was nothing there at all, what had died then?"

A tremendously big show is being played on this as well as on the other side of the wall. Age after age, I grow new skin like a serpent and doing again what I had tried myself in the ages bygone. In each new life, I believed in good faith that I had done something entirely new so new that I had never done before. In every age, I threw a sling to the skies and struck my head against the lamp-post; recognizing in every age the only colour which according to my lights is the crown of all the colours.... the darkness.

Madanvaar and Padmaan:

A Love Story

Akhtar Mohi-ud-Din

Madanvaar breathed his last and Padmaan was released. The thing happened, but did not end there. The story remained... It remained because Padmaan was left with her children, with whom she was in a confrontation, unexpressed though. In case somebody asked Padmaan or her children why you the mother and children are so tilted, they would not be able to reply; they would get a tongue tie for want of words. They would in all probability say that

there was no bone of contention. But there it was, no doubt.

The tale runs like this that sometime back, Madanvaar and Padmaan were reading together. The books then contained true stories written by the outstanding men. The stories had been made into films shown in the cinemas after changing their names.

Madanvaar's heart felt gladdened at reading the stories and so would Padmaan after she went through them. They would look at each other with amazement and wordlessly convey to each other, "Did you understand this? I understood all there is to it."

One day, however, they conveyed these ideas to each other in words rather than looks. That day, the skies got, as it were, clear and it was cloudlessly sunny. The birds trilled so profusely that deafness took leave of the deaf; as if the very breeze honeyed their lips and the crescent moon shown bright on their foreheads.

After this, they went for a film show.

The true stories of the lofty men were shown in the film and these were, then, the true stories of Madanvaar and Padmaan also. There they promised to act upon these stories and after some time, they fulfilled the promise.

But on the very day they fulfilled their promise, there blew a storm. It got overcast and thunders deafened even those who had no such malady and, what is more, it stopped dead what little sprinkling of honey there was in the breeze within the confines of the thick jungle.

This was another truth that had run amuck. This one, like a horrible giant, was giving out peals of laughter in every market place and made its existence felt with thunder and lightning. This truth was the one that belonged to Madanvaar's father and that of

Padmaan's father. The truth of these elderly men piling against each other were spitting fire and raising an uproar. Their truth was different from those recorded by the lofty men in their books and far removed from those presented in the films.

Though the thunder-stormy expression of their truth struck fear all around, Padmaan and Madanvaar held the truth fast to their bosom undiminishingly bright in the raging storm.

It is not so easy to keep the flame going in a hurricane. If you do that, you have to awaken those senses which ordinarily are slumbering. At times, you have to tap those energies of whose existence you are not even dimly aware. That is why the eagle in one's eyes gathers flight and the king cobra in the muscles stretches.

The new awakening in their senses gave them a new furbish. They felt themselves on the top. Then as from those lofty heights they cast their eyes on the 'truth-trees' of their respective parents, it was revealed to them that though the top shoots of their truth were different, they had one root. They do beat each other unremittingly with their branches as the storm rages, but they plop fall down if struck at the roots. It was astonishing that their fathers had not at all taken thought of the root. No sooner was the secret revealed to them than Madanvaar cried out, 'I will make my father understand that all truths have one truth.' No sooner was the truth revealed to them, than Padmaan cried out, 'I will make my father understand that all truths have one root.'

So saying, they felt glad and gave cheers as if they released gaudily coloured butterflies in the air.

The storm passed and there was no need to keep the torch from being put out, but with the passage of time, the torch got forgotten and life revolved round the kitchen and the bath room.

The big truths got overlain with dusty layers of small but perhaps more important truths and nobody felt like removing these... neither Madanvaar nor Padmaan.

Their branch, too, blossomed with flowers time and again, but just like all others; there being nothing like a wonder in that. That would happen in spite of them and would take place even in those who had nurtured their parents' truth. The feeling had rendered the flaming torch meaningless, which to keep aflame they had frenziedly taken up the gauntlet thrown by the hurricane.

Now they no longer went to the films because both of them had perceived that on the day they had promised to act upon the truth in the cinema hall, they were deluded. While watching the film, they had wept for they had felt that their truth and that in the film were one and the same. By and by, it had dawned on them that the truth in the film was a delusion, for example, Dev Das in the film is in fact a person, named Dilip Kumar, nay, not even that, but Yousuf Khan. Then also what they show in the film, is not even the truth of his life, nor is it true perhaps of the man who is actually Dev Das.

Some inner bitterness of Madanvaar and Padmaan was besides leaving a bitter taste in their mouth. It was because of this that they seldom talked to each other. The fact of the matter was that they had never revealed the truth which they had perceived from the heights that their respective father's truths had the same root, their separate tops notwithstanding. They had promised that after felling down the trees, they would guard the root so that one mighty sprout emerged and become a lofty spruce. But there was no purpose then as the hawk had already escaped their hands.

It occurred to Madanvaar many a time that Padmaan was casting for striking at his father's truth-tree and nurturing her own father's one. The same viper was stinging her bosom also. Hence the

bitterness. How would the story end?..... Who knows what turn the fickle time would take!

But Madanvaar's and Padmaan's children grew on. They, too, moved on at a pace proper to youth. It was all clear and sunny for them. The breeze spread honey on the lips and the bright moon shown on their foreheads. Their truth was new and bright; that very truth which the lofty men had written in their books and the film makers presented in their films.

Madanvaar and Padmaan were anxious. Madanvaar now wanted to show the children the falsehood of their truth and show the light of the truth which formerly was his father's truth and now also his own. Padmaan on her part also tried to bring home to them the falsehood of their truth and wanted them to own the truth which had formely belonged to her father and now to her.

The confrontation had created a silent turbulence in their surroundings. This confrontation put on layer after layer and nobody knew which vein to take. Meanwhile, Madanvaar passed away and Padmaan got released. She had a mind that she would bring them close to her with love and sift the fact from fiction so that ice was broken and dark clouds of confrontation were dispelled.

Then one day, as she brought the children close by her, she cleared her throat and after some reflection began to say something, but her tongue locked up. Huddled up, she fell down and died. The children lifted her and brought her to her conclusion as they deemed fit.

Only a talk remains now that had one root but different shoots. Some said that she died close on his heels because of her love she bore him, others said that she had no ailment and died simply of her weakness.

A Cock-Fight

Amin Kmil

The moment Ghulam Khan entered the compound, Shah Mal got up with a start. She did not even so much as remember to wash and wrench her '*pheron*' that had been soiled by eight-month old baby. She seemed as it were have come by a treasure, the way she asked her husband:

"You have got it? I was afraid that you might come empty handed even today."

She almost snatched the cock off him and began to fondle its feathers and the comb. It cost me four and a half rupee." Ghulam Khan put much accent on the word 'rupee' perhaps to bring home the cost to her lest she should take it for some unworthy lame

thing. But Shah Mal was altogether unmindful of that; she simply was experiencing the boundless joy on feasting her eyes on it.

With her brows raised, she cast her eyes towards her neighbour's window. She said to her husband with a pitch raised this time, "This was really the sort of cock I was after, or day in and day out numberless cocks are hawked to sell in the market and the whole mohalla has gone in to purchase that lot."

Gulam Khan did not reply to that and directly went indoors. A string was tied to its legs and it strained much to pace about. It by turns pecked at the string and seemed to take stock of its surroundings.

Janna Bitsh called out from her window. Shah Maal was in fact burning for her showing herself. She assumed nonchalance and pretended shaking dust off her 'pheron in front and shaking her silver ear-rings, rejoined, "we have made the purchase just now for four and a half rupee", putting much more stress on the word 'rupee' than Gulam Khan had done on telling her.

"It seems to be from the village? Jaana Bitsh replied to her in return, "It looks like that. It is a fine sort."

"Will you believe? It is only seven months old yet". Shah Maal fixed its age somewhat arbitrarily.

"It is a different breed. They do not bring this sort to the city for sale. Then the thing remains that no one buys here even such a sort so dear. Here, the stray cocks will do." Shah Maal saw Jaana Bitsh flushing crimson. Apparently, it had dawned on her that it was she who was meant when 'others' were spoken of. She replied? "I have to fry the dishes. You better fill its crop." so saying she went indoors. After her departure, she with a smile playning on her countenance pouted her lips and continued gazing at the cock.

The matter, in truth, was that its purchase soley owed itself to a

spite for Jaan Bitsh. Jaana Bitsh owned five hens and a cock while Shah Maal owned hens only. Jaana's Bitsh cock would once or twice a day hop off and jump down into Shah Maal's compound. Shah Maal, as she had no cock of her own, would take it a godsend. It was a different matter, however when Shah Maal left paddy or some such thing to dry up in the sun, its presence then was an eyesore to her as a stuck like the leech. It could not be prevented from scattering grains pell-mell, much as you tried to scare it off. A fortnight back she had been driven crazy like that, she had come to execrate it losing all restraint. Jaana Bitsh, showing herself at her window, had bandied back with a taunt. "If that be the case, why do not you buy a cock of your own? If you are so fond of it where it suits you, why should a few grains of rice wrench away your life in the bargain?"

Shah Maal would rather die than bear this repartee. That very moment she pestered her husband to buy a cock. Jaana Bitsh, too, from then on kept a vigil on her cock lest it should fly over to Shah Maal's. Ghulam Khan had with one pretext or the other, dilly-dallied for a fortnight, but could not help buying one from a dealer at Maisuma for three rupees. He had added a rupee or so more to forestall her pert likely rejoinder: "See what an inferior stuff you have brought as if you could get nothing else!"

Jana Bitsh's cock was henna-red. The one that Shah Maal owned was white snow-white, dazzling white to be precise. It cut a notch above in its mien to Jaana Bitsh's cock, which, it should be admitted, was much more stout in life and limb; or else both were of the same breed, a few 'annas' more or less hardly mattered.

As the day wore on to a close and everyone went asleep, Shah Maal, lying abed suckling her babe, the entire weight of her head falling on her elbow supported a pillow, she was in the heart of her hearts thinking of the cock... "How green in envy Jana Bitsh might have got... That jeering taunt of her's still galls me... Let that cock

of her's only move over to this side, I will not be worth my salt if I do not tear it off a leg." Ruminating thus, her eyes fell on her husband's face sleeping aside in a separate bed. How handsome he looked to her now, underscribably handsome. But as he lifted her elbow off the pillow, to make for sleep, shrill came a crowing: "kukdoo koon", from the pen. Shah Maal held her breath. She pricked her ears to make sure if she had not misheard. But no. As the cock crowed the second time, life as if slipped out of her. She, all of a sudden sat up in the bed and called her husband to get up.

"Hah, dear... get up. Here, listen to me!"

"Oogh! why?" Ghulam Khan got half awakened. "Did you say anything?"

"Hark! The cock has crowed when it is night yet". Shah Maal was getting impatient. "What an ominous devil of a cock you have bought!"

"Crowing?" Ghulam Khan made a grimace. "How does it matter? We are not to give a morning call to people to be awake for Ramdan fasting!"

"See! What rot he talks"! Shah Maal got angry. "Get up and slit its throat. Don't you know that a cock which crows when it is night yet should be put to knife forthwith? It turns out to be an evil portent."

"Non-sense! This prattle about portents! Please sleep and pay no heed to such humbug". So saying, he tucked himself up under the quilt. Shah Maal, however, much she tried, could not sleep. Ghulam Khan wasted no more time and took to a sound sleep and did not wake up till his wonted hour at seven in the morning.

Shah Maal did not so much mind the off-time crowing as the

likelihood of its having been heard by Jaan Bitsh and making it hot for her by jeering shafts. She might tell her, "Was this the much vaunted cock that you were after? All other cocks brought good tidings of morning light, wheas this ominous creature is possessed by devil when it is night yet."

This very fear of Jaan Bitsh kept Shah Maal from even opening the pen door and letting its feathery beings in the open in the morning. Otherwise come what may, nothing would have stopped her because she would take it out on Jaan Bitsh for many days to come by hurling her taunts via the walls and the fences. As she remained under the shade in the corridor, the cock along with the hens made off to the compound. Seeing this, Shah Maal's heart sank within her. How loathsome it was to her eyes! The cock fanned out its wings and flexed them with relief. It spread a wing fanwise and amourosly made four to five rounds arounds each hen. The hens, to save their skin, went helter skelter as if cautioning the cock: "Fie! What has be fallen you! Do not even look around for shame."

The hens looked for the corridor door as to why Shah Maal did not show herself, not even so much as to cast a handful of grains. They flocked straight to where she was. The cock, too, got a hint and followed their track. As she caught sight of its legs, her face got distorted with contempt. Its legs right up to its body took on a hideous form of the asse's skull, but she did not scare it off lest Jaan Bitsh should get an inkling. She just cast off two handfuls of rice towards the compound.

From across Jaana Bitsh's compound, when her cock heard the unaccustomed "kroo", it raised its neck up, put forward its breast, stiffened its body as if all the sinews of its body shrunk. "kut, kutok, kutock...", it let forth its shrill yells as if to throw a challenging call to the bully that had entered the other compound.

"Kutock, kut, kutock..." Shah Maal's cock also lifted its neck,

apparently as its response.

"Beware. I am the white cock. If only you cross over to this side you will know whom you have to deal with. It would not do to show your fists from the other side."

Shah Maal abhorred these shrieks of its cock. If only it were to give up its ghost so that Jaan Bitsh does not hang on to her window. Instead of shooing it off, however, she flung a sod of clay to hit its head, but it missed it. It only frightened it to hop up with a cutcock which made Jaan Bitsh crane out her neck through her window.

"Why are you out of temper so early in the morning? What has the poor creature done to you?"

Shah Maal seemed as if to have been caught red handed, sweating through and through, all her caution and care came to nothing. She surmised from Jaan Bitsh's talk that she was blatantly casting in her teeth that her anger was due to off time crowing of the cock, but retained her composure, saying, "Far be it from me, why should I? Only the cock does not let the hens approach the grains."

"Come, now, it is only because it is new to the place." Jaan Bitsh said it in a humorous vein, "By tomorrow it will offer the grains to them itself."

"That is possible if we were to keep it, but we bought it to make a meal of it." Shah Maal said this thinking that she would give her no pretext for jeering. "My husband might have got its throat slit right yesterday, but for his being tired out."

"What has happened to you? Why at all should you kill it?" Jaan Bitsh remonstrated. "See, what a fine figure it cuts! And it has a

good voice to boot."

Shah Maal lost her colour, she took the phrase 'good voice' to mean that she had heard the untimely crowing, but to throw her off the scent, she said again, "If I were to fear up such stray cocks, then many were peddled up for sale. The sort of cock I had set my heart for he had not yet come by. Now somebody has given his word to procure such a one at any rate. "Shah Maal perceived that Jaana made nothing out of this reply. She deemed it meant to go indoors instead of listening to something unpalatable she might say.

Shah Maal put some embers into the *samaavaar*, but was all the while taken up in the cocks quandary. As Ghulam Khan returned home after ablutions in the mosque, she said to him as she poured him a cup of tea, "Get the cock's throat slit, after all we are to pass our days in this mohalla."

"Let me after all know what the locality has to do with it." Ghulam Khan asked her chewing a loaf of bread. "This surely is not the month of fasting to cause a mistake in knowing time."

"You do not care, you only talk", Shah Maal got incensed. "Well if you cannot bring yourself to do it, I will be the last to rear this ominous thing up."

"Do it then", Ghulam Khan, cutting the matter short, said, "But mind that you do not make a fresh demand."

"That I will not". Shah Maal, blew in some breath just for the fun of it. "Well, Jaan Bitsh's cock remains there in the compound whole long day."

As Ghulam Khan left for his job, Shah Maal got up to go to Samad Khaash's to make sure that he had not left for any other place.

Samad Kaash was so to say a priest for slitting throats of all fowls of the mohalla. There were many others who did it, but the epithet '*Khaash*' (throat cutter) stuck to him. That is why the curse "Shhh... Let Samad Khaash take you" was hurled at the fowls.

Samad Khaash was still there and said from over his window, "Get it here, I will slit its throat. But, rest assured, I will also partake of it in the evening at yours. You man and wife alone will not take it. Yes"

"Well, who the devil denies you that? You are welcome". Shah Maal replied with a smile as she made for her home. She was pleased with the prospect that Jaan Bitsh will no longer be able to put her to ridicule or else day in day out he would be the butt of her shafts.

Shah Maal, as she entered the compound after her return, witnessed a strange spectacle.: the poor hens had been scared stiff as Jaan Bitsh's cock was locked in a pitched fight with her cock. God alone knew what the hell they had raised and lifted quite a cloud of dust. As if that was not enough, Jaan Bitsh was gloating over the spectacle eccasioned by this fight.

Shah Maal imagined Jaan Bitsh was happy with the thought that her cock would come out the victor, because it looked something of a bully by its stout frame. It had besides put to many a cock in the mohalla. Shah Maal's heart began to pound and her face lost all colour.

Jaan Bitsh's cock was red while that of Shah Maal was white. The small downy feathers of their necks bristled erect in rings. Their heads trembled with rage and their feathers as though let off electric currents. Their bodies elongated and their tale feathers spread out. They were face to face with outstretched necks, spitting around fire and swooping upon each other unanounced, raising

quite a tumult with their beaks.

When Jaan Bitsh saw Shah Maal making an entry in the compound, she sat all the more at ease in the window. To Shah Maal it seemed that she assumed importance.

"Do not you see, how can this stray cock of mine be a match to yours. But it is all the same to a rough street-tramp to give and take hiding. Let there be no mistake however, it will make it take to its heels just as it has made all the cocks of the mohalla eat a humble pie."

A fretting fear choked her, but what could she say? She was repenting over the turn events had taken. She suspected that Jaan Bitsh had on purpose let her cock cross over to this side. She would fain like to strangle it. She, however, took counsel to turn the tables on her instead of being jeered at. So she said, "This cock of mine is not meant for such broils and brawls; a different breed as it is."

The cocks raised a pandemonium by this hulla bullā; bleeding and stripping each other thus of their feathers. Jaan Bitsh fastening herself close to the window, was expectingly bobbing her head, where as Shah Maal by turns grew crimson and then ghastly pallid. She now got despondent and bitter even hurling curses on Jaan Bitsh's cock in a whisper.

"May your beak fall to pieces...may your legs be paralysed.." The cocks bled profusely. One could not guess how far Jaan Bitsh's cock had bled because of its red colour, but Shah Maal's cock showed itself gory through and through as it was white.

Shah Maal could not restrain herself seeing its plight. "May it fall dead in your stead, may its beak fall to pieces."

"Why are you driven to extremes? It is too early yet. See if it will

not make it turn its tail". Jaan Bitsh bandied back. Shah Maal grew desperate, over-wrought as she was by many a foreboding right from the previous night; she might have served so fitting a repartee that even Jaan Bitsh could be silenced. The inner battle might have mounted to vituperative recriminations and execrations, but alas! One of the cocks left the arena all of a sudden. _____ This was Jaan Bitsh's cock. And Shah Maal's cock gave it a chase all around the compound. Shah Maal perceived that sweat exuded from every fibre of her being. Her face was so to say blackened with soot.

Jaan Bitsh, however, as a face saving, had the cheek to pretend that she had nothing to do with the broil.

"Oh, are you going to kill such a cock?" Jaan Bitsh said with her chin resting on her palm, "If you do not mind my saying, do bring it up. Do not kill it."

"Oh then. Did you really take me for my word"? Shah Maal said giving a jingling rotatory shake to her silver ear-rings. "A cock may be marred by one hundred flaws, it may crow untimely even it is night yet, I will be the last one to mind that. But it should give a stiff fight. Such indeed was the sort of cock I was after."

An Infernal Creature

Amin Kamil

People no more believe in such things because such things no longer come to pass in their whereabouts. This does not mean that such an incident could never have occurred in Zaji pathir. Then Zaji pather is very much there for all to see; we can go there even now and witness the remains of the habitation which once it had been. It is at present a meadow where many shepherds dwelling in their hutments, raise flock upon flock. But there was a time when six thousand men and women peopled it and there were five grave yards there to inter the dead.

It is said that was a happy and prosperous habitation. One day an old woman, namely, Saal Dyad, lost a bridegroom of her son who besides was her bread-earner. This poor woman, so to say,

got demented. She had miscarried seven times, and this can alone was born without any mishap, and that too after trying votive rags at many a shrine. She was heard saying, so they say, as her son was buried, "My son, it should have been in the grave, and what I do to you, has to be done by you. Yet I entrust you to God who made me bear you". So saying, she had gone unconscious.

People did not so much as feel for the son, as they felt for her who had nobody to rely on, save God. They somehow or the other brought her and herself and carried her to her hut. During the day, many a neighbour, one after another, brought her tea and rice, but how could she take anything, over-wrought as she was by the bereavement. She only stood gazing at the walls and the ceiling, and kept heaving sighs. Some of her neighbours remained there with her to cosole her and share her grief, but as each of them had to support a household, left, leaving Saal Dyad alone, smarting the wounds that her son had left her.

Like a bird torn of its wings, Saal Dyad moved from one window to another and from one room to the other. As her tormented soul got no solace from all this, she made for the grave-yard to give vent to a wail or two there. It was quite late and all had gone to sleep.

One lost one's breath and could not find one's bearing in the pitch dark around. Then if a slight movement in the air swished a leaf-blade, a piercing chill froze every fiber of one's being; an anguished shriek from your breast stuck near your throat in a whimper, enough to still your terrified heart.

No one else perhaps could have ventured to leave out of doors at this hour, but Saal Dyal could not be kept from this; in her bereavement she stood lonely in the graveyard, wringing her hands and beating her breast. The graveyard was quite some distance from the last house of the village. Another mohalla, Surapore, began

as the graveyard came to an end, every mohalla of that village was separated from the other mohalla by a graveyard, that is why there were five graveyards in a village of seven mohallas.

Saal Dyad had fumbled her way to the graveyard by sheer guess. Meanwhile, the moon also had begun to rise from behind the hill, letting forth a scanty light which had not made any perceptible difference to the darkness. As she was about her son's grave, she perceived something like a human shadow rising up and coming down there. She stood astounded, wondering who could be there at the grave in the dead of night. Her heart was heavily pounding, and her eyes were fixed on the grave. She even perceived the shadow's naked waist upwards and a white hanging sheet waist down. At first she retreated by a pace or two unwittingly, but could restrain herself no longer and addressed it, "who is there fidgeting at the grave?" Saal Dyad noticed that the shadow stiffened with an alarm, stooped to pick something up and then hurriedly ran away. She did not venture to move forth, but her inner pain prodded her nimbly on to her son's grave. There she found it half open as though it had given way under the rain. Seeing this, an uncontrolled scream left her throat, "Hey, is there nobody around to see that some monster is despoiling the grave-yard." This scream awakened all the men and the women of the mohalla and those of Surpore as well. Some took it to mean that some house had caught fire, still others thought that some burgler had broken into some house. All the people were, however, agreed that something untoward had occurred and some came out of their houses. All, without exception, rushed to the site of the uproar, bearing lighted tapers. About five hundred people gathered there in no time. Breathlessly, Saal Dyad recounted faithfully all that she had seen. They warily began to look into the grave to see whether her son's corpse was there. The corpse was no doubt there, but mother-naked, stripped of the shroud. All the people there were at their wits end, unable to understand what had come about, who had opened the grave, and what became of the shroud. "My good sense tells me," one of

the men said, "it might have been a wild boar and Saal Dyad took it for a human being". Another man remonstrated, "What rubbish you talk? The wild boar would have devored the corpse if it had dug it up. The corpse is there all intact, only the shroud is missing. "Then some other person said, "I think some bastard is possessed by the devil that he steals shrouds".

Shroud thief? Sweat of shame began to ooze from every pore of their being; everyone looked to the other dumbfounded.

"The bastard is to be exposed at any cost", one of them got much provoked. "Who can believe that God has turned somebody so swinish. God forgive us! May he be damned in this world and hereafter".

"We should not stop at exposing him only, but set him ablaze in a burning hay-stack." Another got more furious. "Whoever has heard of such a thing before? It is unbearably shameful." Then the people raised a furore. When as many as five hundred mouths give rein to their tongues all at once, it is impossible to make out what each has to say. If per chance there is some wit in what somebody utters, it sounds no better than dog-barking, shorn of its meaning, or no more than bleating of sheep.

"Now what is to be done in this case"? one of the men said reminded of the corpse. "It is to be given a fresh bath and then shrouded. Or is the grave to be closed as it is?"

"In my opinion, the right thing is to exhume it and bury it properly anew", an old man gave his decision. "It is not proper that a man is sent to God mother-naked".

"No, no, no, Shut the grave like that". Saal Dyad implored with her folded hands. "I will get even with the shroud-thief once he is brought to light, meanwhile leave the issue to God".

"Yes, what Saal Dyad says is right. Leave the case for God to decide. Somebody supported her". So far the shroud-thief is concerned, that bastard will certainly be traced down, come what may".

At long last, decision was arrived at to cover the grave. The night meanwhile came to a close and the cocks were crowing their calls at the small hours. All of them left for their homes, overtaken by fear and terror.

That day nothing but the issue of the shroud-thief was talked of by the people of Zeegypathir. Men, women and children, all were paled through fear. Every mohalla of the village tried to fathom the mystery that who among them could do this, but they could not catch hold of any. Gradually, this became the basis of much discord and skirmish because whoever enquired of anybody about the issue, he would fall out with the very man who made the enquiry. "Do you take me for a shroud-thief? Take it from me that the father-in-law of the fuss will be the one in the tribe of the fussy people".

When these queries began to affect their mutual relations, their good neighbouring conduct and fraternity as a whole, everyone began to take thought why he of all the people should confront others. Why to get embroiled; let even the bones of the dead be stolen, for aught should I care, he thought.

During this searching for the shroud-thief, two things came to pass: on the very next day of the shroud theft Seal Dyad's wits altogether took her leave. She went from one dwelling to another during the night. In her tatters, with her hair matted and dishevelled, with sunken cheeks, and bulged out eyes, she moved about in the village like a hag, communicating with none, only giving out frightening screams now and then: "Hey, is there nobody around? See what monster is spoiling the graveyard.". The other

thing that happened was that the shroud-thief had taken toll of another dead body. They suspected this on seeing the grave next day tampered. They opened the grave and found the corpse mother-naked.

The people of the village kept hurling curses on the shroud thief, and he on his part went on robbing all the five graveyards, stripping the dead bodies of their shroud and putting the graves in form again.

It is a bit of plain speaking that anything, good or bad, attached to any person, ultimately becomes a part of his habit. By the same token if it is attached to a nation, the nation adopts it as a form of its custom and usage. In this way, when all the dead bodies of Zeegypore, men and women alike without exception, got robbed of the shrouds, it by and by became a custom with them, then nobody got agitated on this, nor did anybody show any kind of fear. They got used to speaking and hearing of this for two decades. However, they would visit the grave-yard the next day when they interred there any dead. On their way back, they would tell a wayfearer,

“We were at the grave-yard”.

“Has he robbed it”?

“It looks like that”.

“Let the hell take him”?

These four sentences were at the tip of the tongue of everyone there at Zeegypathir, you would be greeted by these words correct to a syllable for it had assumed the form of a ritual like giving the last bath to the dead, and burying the body.

After about twenty years, the out cry that the shroud thief having been found out spread through-out the length and breadth of Zeegypathir. In the habitation of five thousand, it was nothind short

of a sensation, each one, however, expressing his or her feeling differently. The elderly people thanked heavens for the curse having ended, for those born during these twenty years and grown young, neither the shroud thief nor the theft of the shroud had any sensation of significance. They merely for the sake of wonder ran to Surapore where the exposure had taken place. That is why when Saal Dyad came jointly along with a crowd, the youngsters were not touched at all as she gave out her piercing scream. They had grown accustomed to her shrieks right from their childhood and had mimicked it umpteen times, just for the fun of it. But those who remembered the times when she gave it for the first time, felt their healed wounds came into life again.

The shroud thief, Ghana Baabi, came to be known as Ghana Mokul thereafter. His locality Suripora got so thronged with the people that one got the impression of a fair at some big shrine. Everyone tried to make his way forward to get a glimpse of Ghani Mokul's face. But how many could be shown it after a thousand or so had already seen it; it being; moreover, improper to keep him open to the gaze on the bier any longer. Nobody whatsoever could have got an inkling of what and who he was if he had not made the confession in his will. Ghana Mokul in his statement at the death bed had confessed that all along life he had robbed the people of their shrouds. He was now repentantly mortified and would like to be buried mother-naked so that God might forgive him his sins.

The people, however, did not abide by this, thinking it improper to put him into the grave without a shroud, regardless of what he did, answerable as he was for this in his grave and hereafter. They thought it proper to bury him like the other people, that is what humanity and religion demanded.

Ghani Mokul was buried and people as a matter of habit cursed him with hell in all measure. They felt relieved at having been rid of a big calamity.

The next day, when somebody caught sight of the new grave (although graves as a matter of course were being watched in token of the memory of the dead) the corpse was seen lying naked outside the grave. This evil tidings spread like a wild fire in the length and breadth of Zeegypathir. Once more there was a rush of people at the Zeegypathir grave-yard. Some people set it down to angels holding people accountable for the good and bad deeds, having thrown him out of the grave, a sinner as he was. Others put this down to the anguished sighs of Saal Dyad who had particularly screamed there at the graveyard whether there was nobody to see what a havoc the monster had worked in the graveyard. At last they came to agree on one thing that it had been some rascal who avenged himself on Ghani Mokul for his shroud-stealing after his death.

The truth, however, was that the soft-hearted people of Zeegypathir there did not like to go so far. They first hurled much abuse at the wrong doer, but then took counsel that Ghani Mokul be put back as he was in the grave. An old man, taking exception to this, as being improper, admonished, "He shall have to be given a bath and offered a *Jinazah* prayer".

"But why did you not agree to giving a fresh bath to Saal Dyad's son"? another old man put him in mind of a thing happened twenty years back.

"Because that did not lie exposed on the edge of the grave". the first man put it right, "He was very much in the grave. There is a world of difference between this and that".

The next day morning, he again lay exposed in stark nudity on the grave-edge. As this was not enough, two or three more dead bodies buried the day before in another grave-yard, lay exposed outside their graves in the same manner. It now dawned on the people that it was not simply a case of wreaking vengeance on

Ghani Mokul. A new monster was on the rampage there, who threw the dead out of their graves.

Everybody at Zeegpathir got scared and said to one another, "We cannot find another man like Ghani Mokul. He no doubt divested the dead bodies of the shroud, but naked by no means did he leave them. This hellish creature is far worse than a brute".

Then onwards, the people showered blessings on the former and cursed the new culprit with all the abominations of the hell.

What Matters is the Head

Amin Kamil

He said to me somewhat chagrined, "These matters are more than you can comprehend; forensic matters as they are. *yeh bada naazuk masla hai*. This is not so simple as to ask your granny to set a *baath* plate for you". He lifted a cigarette packet and remained silent.

He lighted a cigarette and puffed out a thick whorl of smoke upwards to the ceiling, which gradually thinned out and spread throughout the room, leaving a foul smell in its wake after dissolving indistinguishably in the air.

I sat tongue-tied and was reflecting over why men puff out smoke to foul the surrounding; what comfort they derive from this, stifle others making their life impossible. While I was lost in such reflections, he said again, "No, it is not a question of body, it is a matter of the head. I am not worried about its flesh and the skin; it might as well be devoured by a dog, for aught I care. The problem with me is which side did its head point to". Then saying with some stress, "*yeh meeraa masla hai.*" (It is my problem) I also thought this was true. What is a man worth after all without the head and the brain, being the place where all the conceit was stuffed? Gathering myself, I broke the silence: "But did you know which side did the head of the corpse point to"?

"*hum ko sub maloom hai*" (We know everything), he said with his teeth clenched tight. "They think that by resorting to underhand means they will bring the matter to their side. *magar hum ne kachi gooliyan nahin khaayin hain*, I being an old shark for that matter; I am not a raw hand who by greasing other's palms became a *thaanedaar*. I, on the contrary, have drawn my sustenance for the last thirty years from my police service. No such tricks to me".

I could easily believe this. One could not save oneself from even one such worm, but then sandwiched between two such creatures, one could not but take thought of one's obsequies and last rites. The worm is after all a worm; if it sticks, it sticks fast. You might try your utmost to detach it, but come off it will not. This in fact was the plight in which the corpse was caught in between the two worms.

I had just got wind to the matter curiously, but was not aware of its depths, that is why I was trying to get to the bottom of the thing, nothing else. Neither was I a *Punch* to deal out justice after hearing the case, nor could I wash myself clean to the matter, even after being aware that caught as I was between two veterans. It was I who could get the slip. It required a far mightier Jinni to

overpower the less mighty one. To unravel the matter, I asked again, "It might be that you came to know of the matter rather late, or else how could that Thaanedaar of Khaanpur swindle you"?

I perceived that he got flattered, because his neck got a tilt, a smile played on his lips, a devilish gleam glistened in his eyes. This lasted only for a moment and his brows screwed narrow and showered fire. "This mistake occurred all due to that Amma constable. Do you know him"?

"Yes sir, verywell". I blurted out, without in fact knowing him.

"The fool that he is, he did not stop that man", he explained

"He did not send the information over to me in the soon, otherwise I would have known everything *doodh kaa doodh paani ka paani*. nevertheless, I set my own records straight."

"Well sir, who was he after all"? I asked him with a view to make the things clear.

"How do I know? Confound Ama constable's head". He got a bit vexed, "They sneak into the police when they do not even get a thing after begging; they have no brains at all, *yeh maamle ki nazaakat nahin samajhte*. Strangely enough, he tells me after the man had left, that it was a man on horseback who informed that the corpse lay near the Chinara tree at Poshi Marg. What can you say of such man? You understand? How on earth did you leave that man without knowing from him who he was and wherefrom he hailed? What if he had murdered somebody, why? It is possible. A thaanedaar has to consider minute details. Do you not think so"?

"It admits of no doubt, so far it goes, all the more, when so shrewd and astute a thaanedaar has taken the case in his hand. Well now is there any snag, any obstruction"?

"Obstruction?" he widened his eyes owl like, putting his police

cap down with his left hand straightening his neck. "No snag no obstruction, *thonth shonth kuch nahin hai*, we have gone through such sporting sprees. Our records are foolproof. I will see to it that this Khaanpore thaanedaar proves his undoing. *kaagaz boul uthenge*", (the documents will speak of themselves). So saying, he burst into an uproarious laugh. I too, on my part felt like laughing, but I took counsel with myself, poor me, this man I laughs for what he knows best, why to get embroiled.

He picked up something like a grain of sugar from a plate on the table and put that into his mouth, asking me at the same time to take one, "You take it also". With a touch of hospitality. I also picked up one and puit that into my mouth. It was so sweet. No doubt about that!

"Well sir, this thaanedaar at khaanpora will not sit merely with his hands folded, he might also have thought things out". I said, "*soochne do ji*, (Let him think). His brains will merely get addled. When has he been able to think that he will think today? *hum har tarah se chokus hain*". (We are on our guard).

"What sort of mischief might have done? "I asked him like a simpleton.

"Well yes, I will tell you". He moved his head with an air laying bare the whole mischief. Hardly had I heard of the corpse lying near Poshi Marg chinaar tree, I along with my whole staff ran there. It took us some time. Our thaana is not a ramshackle of a scavenger's hut like that of Khaanpore, it has a vast jurisdiction. The moment we reached there, lo and behold! He was already there along with a few of his rickety constables. The corpse stood there near the chinar, *magar hum sub badmaashi samajh gaye* (We at once got the hang of the mischief). But whom do they think they would hoodwink? As for that, I am too clever for them.

He took another grain of sugar and gave it a mighty crunch. I

wanted to understand how come that handling of one single corpse by two thaanedaaars. To my mind the corpse belonged to one in whose territory the corpse lay; it would ip-so fac-to be his headache. That is why I asked with some measurable perplexity.

"All right sir, Under whose jurisdiction did the corpse fall?" "The corpse was under the jurisdiction of neither. It was there on the demarcation line of the two thaanas. We were duty bound to go there and so were they, *ham koyi ghalat baat nahin kahen ge*". He lifted his neck and looked owl-like outside the window where a couple of police men were beating somebody. I could also look there clearly.

"Well sir, how does it explain anything"? I asked ingenuously. "Once I think, would be enough to conduct the enquiry".

"What do you mean by one"? He returned with a hint of sarcasm. "The right of enquiry belongs to one whose jurisdiction it refers to".

"Well, then sir, according to their version, it lay on the demarcation line". I said.

"That is true, but towards which side did its head lie? This is to be settled".

I got lost, it did not at all enter my head. He had talked of the head before also, but I had taken it casually then.

"Ok sir, what has the head anything at all to do with the matter"? I asked.

"*taaluq hai zaroor hai*", (It is a connection, It's) he said with emphasis. "I had already told you that these are beyond your ken; this is a forensic point. In case a corpse lies on the demarcation line

between two thanas, it can be possessed by the one towards which the corpse head is directed”.

As tounded, I asked, “Granted sir, then where did the corpse’s head point to”? The issue had in fact come up before also, but I had not noticed the nicety of it then.

“*yahi badmaashi hai*” (There lies the devilry) he said shaking both his head and body, “This corpse-scavenger of Khaanpore had already reached Poshi Marg. This spawn of the devil. I have understood all the devilry. He had got the head of the corpse turned towards his direction so that he might bring the corpse under his possession. I am an old card sharper at that; I would have been the last man to let him do that”

The matter was now getting clear to me. One thing yet remained to be clarified. That is why I asked him, “What precisely did you do then”?

“I would not allow him to appropriate the corpse; I got those beggarly never-do-well constables of his thoroughly flogged by my sepoy. The dispute arose and I do not care who hoots for it. *kaagaz khud bolen ge...* The matter drags on as it is.

It occurred to me, if the corpse were possessed by an evil spirit. Happens so, not improbable. It might rise and straight leave for its home. But soon I came to myself, telling him, “But, this corpse...It will rot. How long after all....”

He did not let me complete what I had to say.

“*sadne do ji*. What matters really is towards which side is the head lying. So long as the dispute is not resolved, the matter will linger on as it is”.

I fell silent.

This too is a Feeling

Bansi Nirdosh

She suffered from no particular malady or pain, but the look in her sad and ailing eyes was expressive of something that I failed to apprehend, something was eating in Bimalas vitals. It was not that she bore me a grouse, never, we suffered from no privation or want. True it is that we were not rolling in wealth, but we managed to live well. She possessed all that middling house-wife would reasonably like to have. If it were possible to get a salary for sitting beside one's wife, I would never be tired of her company for the whole day. Well, now when a couple are so fond of each other that they live just by looking at each other, life, has to be beautiful as the radiant full moon.

In this blissful of married life, whenever I noted sadness on

Bimla's contenance, I would feel upset. I would fain feel tempted to ask her what had befallen her. But I would at the same time think if that would not augment her grief further. In the twinkling of an eye, sometimes her thoughts would wander, one never knew where, and got lost for a moment. If during this state of mind I tried to rouse her, a faint smile would creep over her lips and instantly vanish. I therefore, did not venture to ask her anything.

I always yearned to unravel the mystery, season or out of season. I wanted to make her reveal her secret, by hook or crook, but every time she eluded me. It was really bewildering that occasionally in her abandon, she would talk without a restraint, and then suddenly fall mute. It seemed that something long forgotten raised its head in her mind.

Whenever, I tried to ask her the reason for this, she either side-tracked or would say, "It is out of love for me that you worry for nothing; I am fit as fiddle. There is nothing wrong with me". This too was a lie, and I could no more swallow anything of it.

I began to believe that she was driving me crazy by saying anything but truth. Meanwhile, Nika was born to us. How chubby! Every shade like his mother. But whenever, I saw his mother, I was horror-stricken. Her bloom was missing; what blight has overtaken her! What evil eye has afflicted her? I wonder.

One day, brimmed over as I was, I contained myself no longer. I made her sit beside me and said to her, "Bimla, why are you concealing from me? What is it that you are taking to your heart, and for what?" Saying this, I surveyed her head and foot, and looked for a change in the colour of her face. But Bimla did not so much as lift her eyes. I told her again, "There is no love-lust in you for me".

In fact, I did not want to give utterance to it at all because I too,

had no faith in it. Hearing this, a frown appeared on her forehead and said, "Who the devil has told you? Or may be you have come by an instrument of measuring love".

This reply evoked a laughter in me. To be frank, it was out of place; I should not have laughed. I wanted to talk warily and circumspectly. Her reply gave me a boost. It is a weakness with me that I cannot contain myself for joy if there is a hint of affection from my wife's side. I told her, "Don't hedge around as if I do not understand this".

"What after all do you understand?" She pounced on me. For a long time she wistfully fixed her gaze on me that my legs cowered beneath me. But I was determined to make her speak the truth.

"You have grown sick of me", I told her with a cold indifference.

"This only seems to you", she said this in a manner with her eyes downcast as if she meant really to ask her if I was trying to fathom how deep in water she was.

"I love nobody but you".

Pointing to the child, I said, "Not even Nik Lal, you mean"?

Nika was fast asleep in his cradle, emitting sounds from his running nose.

"Not more dear than you", she said.

On hearing this, there was no doubt my whole body sweated for shame. A freshness and a new current of life ran through my body. The stiffness that was there gave way to relaxation. It was because of such piquant gestures and talk of her that my love for her never assailed by doubt.

"Then why don't you tell me? Why are you so despondent? What grief, God forbid, gnaws you?"

"What grief could I have? She said after a pause. "I have none, albiet there is one thing that always corrodes me within".

"Then why don't you tell what the thing is"?

"What shall I say to you? This is not a thing fit to be said to you".

At this, I changed my colour, partly stricken with fear and in part with anxiety, I said to her with much effort. "Well, if you do not want to".

On this she was roused again and a smile appeared on her lips.

"Did I not tell you that the thing does not concern you at all?"

"Whom does it concern then? "My voice had grown feeble like the one who confronts a thief in his sleep. I continued with some uneasiness", you swear on my life! Speak plainly, I can search him out".

"I do not know really who he was", she said with some anger as if she wanted to say that she should be left alone and that I has stuck to her like a leach.

"How astonishing"! I rejoined.

"Yes, Isn't it? That is why it vexes me". She said. So saying, she fell to ruminating again. My patience brimmed over, but in spite of that, I told her with some coaxing. "Well, think of it, in case you nurse a pain or malady in your bosom, how can I put up with this"? My voice betrayed me. It was not really my voice, it was some

different man, my tongue faltered. every word came with some effort, while inwardly many an idea and fear raised their head.

Bimla seemed very far remote from me, in spite of her close proximity, she was not with me at all, as if all these years of married life were a dream or an illusion. So all aquiver, I said to her consolingly, "Well, you share it with me, I may also know what it is, perchance I might find a way out".

"There is nothing you can do", she ran her fingers into my hair, "It is not for you to do anything. It is no use telling you".

I felt my body as if entangled in prickles. If she ran her fingers into my hair before, how delighted I felt, but now it looked as if ants were swarming through my hair. I scratched my hair by my fingers and said to her, "Well, there is no harm in telling it. Am I not yours, and are you not mine, too"?

My manner of speaking was altogether altered; it did not really come from my heart, She too, probably understood it and said, "It seems you can't rest contented unless you hear it. I on my part have no objection in telling you".

Forcing an artificial smile on my lips, I said at random, "Then relate what the story is".

If on the one hand, I grew serious, I felt strength slipping away from my body, on the other. My heart had received a jolt, it was as if I was awaiting some unknown verdict. Something was gnawing within me making my heart pond. A question painfully haunted me, thirsting for an immediate answer. But the answer did not lie with me, it rested with somebody else.

I grew somewhat fidgety and began to listen to her, while she said with a measure of equanimity;

“Well, listen then. It happened during the period when I was not yet married to you, but I had been engaged to you; marriage proper took place some days later. I was at my *maatamaal* (mother’s parental house) for I had been invited there on a ceremony. I had asked my maternal uncle to buy me a satin dhoti, but he had found no time for it. I had to leave for my home the next day. Leaving for his office, my uncle told me, “Here is the money for you. You shall buy a dhoti after your heart”.

I prepared for leaving for the market several times during the day, but my aunt and the granny did not let me go out of the doors. I left without their leave in proper make-up in a *shilvaar kamiz*. Until then, I used to be wary of leaving alone and unescorted, but then I had given up that caution too because, being as good as a married woman, I felt rather dauntless and free. The time I left for the market to buy the dhoti, it was quite clear, or may be it might well have been over cast at some places, I do not know for certain.

Having the dhoti purchased from the market, when I was to leave for my *maatamaal*, it began to rain in torrents. I passed my understanding how the clouds had gathered so thick. I was soaked to the bone, my trousers stuck to my legs, even the wrapped new dhoti got wet. I did not so much mind my clothes getting wet, it mattered little, what really perturbed me was if the dhoti just purchased from the market got wet; who could believe it to be a brand new. That I would quicken my pace to run also would be unseemly.

While passing the market thus, it appeared to me as if I had nothing to cover my body with, as if the whole of the market place had gathered on shop porches for having run mad to witness my plight. Some of them had taken shelter in the lanes, and some tried to crowd under a single umbrella they saw. Having the feeling that all the people in the market stared at me, I felt humiliated, and so I changed the route and took to the Bund. Having reached

the Bundh, I felt as if I was released from prison. There on the Bundh, you could quicken your pace. I set off almost on a trot, but the rain overwhelmed me still more.

Meanwhile, I saw a man walking with an umbrella overhead; he was almost my age. As he neared, he stole a look over me under his umbrella. I do not usually talk to way-farers while walking, but this time, I blurted out. I said to him with some hesitation, "If you do not mind, will you give me your umbrella, please? I have to go there some distance".

"Oh yes, you take it please. Make use of it".

I took hold of the umbrella, but I felt ashamed of my selfishness. I didn't talk to him even once. He, on his part, too, did not enquire where and how far I had to go. He was some paces behind me. From his foot steps I could gather that he was eight to ten paces behind me. My dhoti was spared of rain because of the umbrella, else it would have become a wet rag. I clean forgot him till I reached my maatamaal and entered the door. I was inwardly cursing myself that my aunt and dyad would make it hot for me and subject me to dressing down and scolding. Worrying thus, I went upstairs where my uncle, who had already returned from his office, told me to shift my clothes as he saw me drenched through and through. I left an umbrella there in some corner and entered the other room to shift my clothes.

Several days after this incident, our marriage took place... It was an entirely new world to me then. And then I left for Ladakh with you... "Here Bimla paused for a while. And it was quite true. I had been transferred to Ladakh and Bimla had accompanied me. From there, I was sent back to Baramulla. Since her account increased my eagerness, I did not like this pause, and I asked her, "Yes, what happened after this"?

"Then what should have happened"? she said casually, "On my

return from Baramulla, I came to my maatamaal one day".

"I know this much", I said to her butting in.

"You do not listen to the whole story", she continued without looking at me. "Dyad had been craving to see me. She was much pleased when she saw me there for two days and two nights. She put question after question about Ladakh, its people, its customs and rituals, and particularly about we two".

"About me also"? I asked her with a smile. At this she turned her face to other side and resumed, "However, on the third day evening, there was a drizzle. I was sitting by my Dyad, who ruminantly turned over the events of her youth, and my aunt was in her kitchen. As the rain drops began to beat on the tin roof, my aunt rushed out from the kitchen very infuriated. She at first looked at her mother-in-law, and then, looking through the window, gave a nod to her. I kept looking alternately from my aunt to Dyad.

"Is it so"? My Dyad asked her, raising her eye-brows. I got in a fix.

"What is the matter"? I asked both of them. "What is it that you convey in such signals"?

"Nothing, my daughter, nothing", Dyad answered, but this did not satisfy me. I got up to look through the window and they burst out laughing uproariously. I grew more suspicious that there was something fishy; I felt somewhat odd.

"Now, for God sake, tell me why this whispering"?

I noticed that Dyad was somewhat scandalised. She told me in turn, "Nothing, my daughter; it is a matter of no importance. Well, don't you see that there is an electric pole there at the roadside"?

I thought that she was fooling me and I asked her again, "Well, what if it is there"?

"There is a young boy standing there against it".

"There might be one", I said to her annoyed.

This reply of mine was taken ill by her. She said, "Don't go on harping your own tune. Listen to what I say, the boy, you see there, has been coming there for several years. Whenever it looks like rain, he suddenly makes his appearance there at the lamp-post, as if waiting for someone. He neither talks to anybody, nor replies to anything if asked. Your Maama dear, to whom my life be sacrificed, too, saw him umpteen times stock-still transfixed there. He thought of reporting it to the police, but I told him it would be no use, it was immaterial to us and that he would ultimately tire out his legs standing there".

I, just nonchalantly, assented to what Dyad said. I asked her again, "You are right, but who is he after all"?

"God alone knows. He never replies if asked". Dyad said wondering. "And now see, there he is, when it is yet to rain. Now, not until we shut our compound door and switch off our lights, this son of a mother will not budge from there. He does it only when he is convinced that we are asleep. Till then he goes on wearying his legs there".

Her talks made me lose of my composure. Getting up I looked through the window again. There, surely enough, was a young man standing by the lamp-post ... Who he could be? Sinister premonitions crossed my mind. I went to the room below, just to ward off my suspicion, and slammed the window shut. This sound made him look up .. I was at my wits end to recognise him at once. In the electric light, the rain drops on his face glistened like

mercury.

My legs cowered beneath me. I almost was bereft of my consciousness; my feet began feel very heavy. There was a simmering sensation in every fibre of my being. I felt everything around aflame, and a multitude was running to put the fire off. I also felt a water-fall rushing down my ears and I feared that it would wash me down, or the fire might turn me into ashes. I was totally unsettled. I at once climbed up the stairs to the attic with my heart pounding within. I was there after five years rummaging for the umbrella. The Granny saw me doing this and asked me what I was looking for.

"I am searching for an umbrella which I had forgotten here sometime back". I said.

"Oh, was that yours"? she wondered. "We have kept it there in the topmost attic as nobody claimed it. Go and find it there, where it will be in all likelihood".

I ran up to the topmost attic where rummaging here and there, I found it hung up under the ceiling. It was as if I came by a treasure. I shook dust off it by the hem of my dhoti. Much perturbed, I climbed down the stairs and reached the compound gate. Keeping myself half-hid behind the door, I handed over the umbrella to him, saying, "Will you please take this umbrella"?

He approached the gate and his deep breath plunged daggers through my soul even when I was behind the door. I cursed myself for having asked him for that umbrella and putting that luckless man to so much trouble; I rather loathed myself for this. He got hold of the umbrella saying the while, "Why did you take this trouble, you could keep it".

"Kindly forigive me. I am really ashamed of myself". I told him

without showing my face, for how could I look him in the face?

"Is it worth the trouble?" The manner he told me this, I missed.

"It is really gave you an immense trouble", I said in a subdued tone, tears welling up in my eyes.

"It is such a paltry article, I was not worried for it at all", he replied in return.

What was he then anxious for, was a query rising from within me. Pausing for a while and composing himself, he said, "It was raining that day, I apprehended lest...."

His reply could not be completed because I should have forthwith asked him, "What were you apprehensive for"? But I did not want to get to the root of the thing. I struck a little bit bizarre that he should have been anxious for the umbrella.

Then, for whose sake and for what had he been waiting for so long? I reflected feeling restless. I thought how could I ask her for what had he been waiting for all those years. I could not so much as utter a syllable for a pretty long time. At long last, I looked outside the door, but there was no one there!

When I Wore a Neck-Tie

Som Nath Sadhu

How pretty the name sounds, 'neck-tie'! One turn to the left, another to the right, one more behind, and then this way, and then have a look in the mirror, the geography of your face is completely transformed. The throat that had been made unseemly with a projecting Adam's apple, now looks like a bouquet of flowers with the tie round it. The truth is that so long as you have a tie round your neck, you seem somewhat distinguished. Your ownself and the things around you look fascinating and pretty. It is only natural for a man who wears a tie to have a suit also to match, the pants have to be creased, boots polished, collars clean and a well-washed

handkerchief in the pocket. This done, a man's very deportment takes on a different look. You may not have a farthing in your pocket, but the external get up hides your penury. People take you for an affluent and wealthy man, but the wearer of the tie alone knows how agonising it is when you do not have the petty amount to buy even a beetle leaf.

I too, wore a neck tie one day ... only for a day ... why, only for once. But the adventure is such as bears no recounting. However, since you are no strangers, it will be no shame to open my breast to you. Well, listen then. One day, sitting in my office, it occurred to me why I do not wear a neck-tie, when some of my friends drawing lesser pay than I do wear it. Am I in any way inferior to them? This idea possessed me and then, one day I bought a guady tie. I had got my suit dry-washed and I made up my mind that I would go to my office only with the tie on henceforth. How could one resist a temptation like this. In the next morning, I wore the tie on a shirt got washed and pressed by the washerman. While I, self-conscious and shy, was treading my way to the office, every acquaintance I met, first cast his eyes on the tie and then brought a forced smile on his face and said, "Well, so fine... so fine... You have done so well".

I tried to probe in my mind, was it after all a good thing I did. But then the idea of even those friends of mine drawing lesser pay, yet wearing guady ties, assered me.

And then I walked on like a man of consequence, with my hair brushed up, my pants meticulously creased, and my boots shining bright, till I reached Badyaar crossing. There, my eyes fell on the edge of the drain. It was a two-rupee note lying there and I felt tempted. What a cupidity! The moment I caught a glimpse of it, I changed my colour. Untill then, I had walked calmly and unperturbed, but there, a natural break of my legs. I looked around and found everybody engrossed in his round of work. Then I

bethought to myself whether it would be proper to pick it up. But then, as nobody was noticing, there was no shame to pick it up. I moved two or three steps forward, but retraced reaching the place where the note lay. I took thought again, "Will it be proper to pick it up.... with this tie on...? Will it be proper"?

Looking at the note, I felt it looking at me and asking, "It was only for you that I was waiting here. Then why don't you pick me up"?

I deliberately let fall a piece of paper from my pocket near the note...How my breast pounded! From my toes up I got as cold as ice. My face blushed, my legs were all atremble and I was profusely sweating on my forehead. In this trepidation, I touched the note with my hand. Hardly had I touched it when there resounded peals of laughter on all sides.

As I looked back, I found all the shopkeepers and a swarm of children bursting with laughter ... Imagine my plight then. What a calamity might have befallen me. I felt my eye-sight dimmed and it was as if I came to see the stars in broad day-light. My limbs got stiff wood, my mouth got distorted, and my face was as if besmeared with a bagful of turmeric. I felt as if molten lead had been poured in my ears.

A minute or so later, a fop of a man showed himself and said to me with a laugh. "Forgive me for the trouble taken, this note has been let fall there for fun by the children". So saying he snatched away the two-rupee note from my fingers. I stood dumb and only looked sheepishly at them. He burst out laughing again and said to me, "Who could believe that a suited-booted gentleman like you would look at the edge of the drain"?

"Sorry! Oh my! was it there only for the fun of it"? I came to myself and haltingly continued, "Alright... it does not matter...well..."

Then as I began to leave that place, there was again an uproar. I did not so much mind the grown up people as those brats of children. They whistled and clapped their hands. Two youngsters shouted full mouthed; "Gentleman, hai, Gentleman, hai hai! Neck-tie sootas, zet, zet!! (Shame shame to the gentleman, shame to the neck-tie and the suit!)

I pinched my body and wrung my hands, bewailing my lot: "Oh poor me! Why were you waylaid by the two-rupee note? You were walking in pace, what curse took you? Why at all you got trasnafixed there?" In short, I cursed myself and the people with all the execrations I managed to gather. They put me to ridicule and made me so unnerved that I felt that every wayfarer was watching me, and me alone.

I had then to turn to the left as I had to reach Gawkadal, but I reached Lal Chowk where I heaved a sigh of relief. I looked around and felt somewhat at ease. There I took two tumblerfuls of cold water, but this too did not quell the fire within me.

Somehow I reached my office.

"It is only expected that you will not design to talk to us", said a friend of mine.

"My God, you look every inch a hero with this tie on!" opined another friend.

I remained silent and looked with a hang-dog look, now to this one then to the other.

Now please do talk or do you feel we are not happy at this? Confound the man who takes it ill".

"Why to tire ourselves unnecessarily", another quipped. "Don't

you see the new tie, the new suit? The property it calls for can be met only in the canteen. Let us go there before the boss comes".

They were not the men to be diasgreed, while inwardly it was gnawing me. They tugged me away to the canteen. They took all that they liked, playfully and joyfully, but how could I bring myself to eat! I felt as if choked down the gullet. With every sip of tea, there arose before me the scene at Badyaar. I swallowed the cup with much difficulty. There I met other acquaintances also, all fulsome with praise for the tie of mine. Some said, "It is from Germany", others called it Swiss. I simply stared at them and gave a nod to the 'made' they gave it.

All the day long, I sat uneasy at the office like a fish out of water, entering one room, and then another.

In the evening, everybody left for their homes. On my way, it occurred to me that I had to take the Badyaar rout to my home. It happens that I might come by someone there and how humiliating it would be for me then! "How about roaming at Amira Kadal till it gets dark? Yes that course would be better". I said to myself. "But where to go"? While I was thinking this, I caught sight of an English movie advertisement. "Very good, what a fine thing! It would be quite dark till the movie comes to an end". The bell rang and it was time for the issuing the ticket. Leisurely I put my hand in my pocket inside. "Oh, I am undone!" I almost shrieked while having my hand still in my pocket. The shriek disappeared in the air. I looked around, "Thank God, nobody heard my shriek as everybody was busy in buying tickets, By and by, I began to beat a retreat. On the road below, I moved out my hand from my pocket and found two four anna coin in my palm. I closed my palm and began to take stock how come this that there were two four anna coins when I had put a one rupee note there ... "O yes, how short my memory is! Did not I take two glasses of lemon juice in the market it too had to be paid for. Oh, was I ever wont to taking lemon juice as I

left for office. May be I had killed those demons in my previous birth, who but killed me in the morning ... What now? It was the third bell as I lay thinking so. The black curtains were drawn on the door and the film started.

“What if I buy a third-class ticket? Who will notice this in such a rush? It was the counsel I took with myself. “Alright, but what will people say ... with this tie on? Oh no, it will only be to humiliate oneself... Then? It will be better undo the knot and put the tie into my pocket. That done, it would not matter whether I go to the first class or the third”. Considering this, I moved to the backside of the cinema hall, undid the knot and put the tie quickly into my pocket. I bought the ticket and with a stoop, entered the third class. Unfortunately, the hall was chokeful. How could one move ahead. Overwhelmed with shame, I took my seat at the first step of stairs that led down to the hall. I had been to the third class two or three times before when I was young, but it was for the first time that I had to sit on the first step.

Soon, as my eyes fell on the screen, I got a start. My God, What is it that I see? Are the oblong things some muskmelons or human heads? I wiped my eyes to make sure. This changed the whole scene as I began to see two headed figures. Why? may be the actors ther are like that. Only providence knows!

Then I gave a gentle elbow jerk to one sitting by me and asked him in muffled respectful tone, “Do you make out anything”?

“Nothing at all”! replied the man disgruntled, “I feel we have been cheated. Oh the film the day before! The dances, each dance was worth a lakh!”.

“You are right”, I returned with a sigh. I asked him one thing, and the reply was for something else. “Whatever that may be, there the film goes on, and it is a different matter that I see

something different. May be there is a motor car at a speed, it seems to me a longish van is running there. Trees upside down! I am accustomed to two-wheeled bikes, but what my eyes make out is one-wheeled ones. "I wept and laughed at the same time, pitying the poor me for the plight. Good or ill, two and half an hour passed and the show came to an end. I covered the steps in a long jump and stopped at the road.

As I felt inside my pocket, the tie ... the tie was not there. I was at my wits end. As I was still searching my pockets, a group of my friends gathered there and passed their remarks about the film. One of them said that, that was a good film, the other said that, that was a commonplace one, and I simply said, "Yes, Yes". as a matter of form, while inside me I was embittered. But it was not a thing to be said to anybody and what would they say if they heard.

While those 'friends of mine' talked things about the film, I heard somebody from behind. Turning my head, I saw a man wearing a blanket saying to some other man, "I wish I could have come by something different! What use is this coloured tie for me"? Really it must have been some poor good-for-nothing man to see the film with a tie. Well, this will do for a collar to the puppy, we have at home. We have been saved the expenses for buying it".

So saying, both of them mounted a bicycle and ran away tuning a song towards Drugjan. My eyes followed them till they turned the corner.

The Journey and the Companions

Deepak Koul

There was a time when people in the mohalla could do nothing, not even swallow a morsel of food, without Ved Lal being a party to it; not to speak of Tota Koul to whom he was the 'Mama' (maternal uncle). Now things have come to pass that nobody comes forth to carry his earthly remains to the cremation ground.

The gossiping women of the watering place heard of Ved Lal's demise at the early day-break, they were terrified and saying *trahi trahi!* (Save, save) they went to their homes. Some of them heard of it on their way to the watering place and retraced their steps to

their homes. They poured water on Shamboo and on reaching their homes, told their home people of the event and they felt sad.

Even those who would never visit Shiva's temple, came there as heard of Ved Lal's demise. There they found Ved Lal's body wrapped in a rag of a blanket in a dark corner of the Dharm Shala; there was pallor of death on his face, his eyes were shut, his mouth agape in his death-sleep.

Who could believe it to be the selfsame Ved Lal whose humour would cause side-splitting laughter, whose presence graced even the walls of a room, and now there was such a pallor on his face it was hard to believe that a smile had ever played on his lips.

Whosoever came there, heaved a sigh and left for his home after washing his face at the water tap. Everybody had had a look at him and then left. It occurred to none that Ved Lal had to be carried to the god of Death and cremated.

That Babaji of the temple got worried as to what was to be done with him; nobody felt concerned about him. He had waited to see if some relative of his might come and rid him of the responsibility, but it was noon and his anxiety mounted. This Babaji knew but little of him. Although Ved Lal would go to the temple on some evenings to have a puff at the hookah or to offer something and then have a passing chat with the Babaji. He would ask him in Hindustani, "Babaji, what is today's food...?"

Don't you feel the chill? When do you intend to go to Amar Nath?"?

This was his sole contact with the Babaji, so how could he be expected to know him.

Now, when it was getting late, Babaji began to lose heart and went to Mali Los who lived at the Temples compound. He asked him, in a melange of Kashmiri and Hindustani, whether he had no one to take care of him. Mali Los sighed and said, "He has no one

to call his own, he was completely forlorn, all alone. Those to whom he did good turns, do not remember his favours". Saying this, tears gushed up in his eyes and the Babaji was bewildered. Sensing his aggrieved face, Mali Los added, "Babaji, if you only knew what a fine man Ved Lal was! Only he knew what sorrows betided him". At this, Babaji got all the more anxious and sat at Mali Los's window, lost in his thoughts.

Ved Lal was also known as Ved Maam, whether he could be an uncle to them or not, nevertheless, he was the 'Maam' to everybody. He was a cousin of Tota Koul's mother from her mother's side. Actually he hailed from Wadviny. Having lost his parents, when still a child, whom would he live with then? Tota Koul brought him to his home as he had no child of his own then and as such enjoyed some affection there. Then children were born to Tota Koul later on, Ved Lal lavished much care on them. He had never seen his father because he was born posthumously. But as he grew up, he called his late father 'Laali'. Tota Koul often laughed at this but he still swore of his 'Laali'. Ved Lal, to be sure was not beholden to Tota Koul, because he had a house of his own and also owned a piece of land. Its produce went to Tota Koul. The money got by selling his house was handed over to Tota Koul. Then he put in some exertion to pick up petition writing. His earnings were not inconsiderable. Part of it was laid by, and a part of it went for the expenditure at Tota Koul's household.

He never got any match, nor did he make any effort to this effect. It could have been possible had somebody taken any pains and shown concern in time, and as such remained a celibate.

Then, as Tota Koul also departed to his heavenly abode, he assumed the 'master's' mantle. He did everything in fact and deed. Not even a brother born of one's own mother and father would do what he did for Tota Koul's children. He bequeathed his land to Tota Koul's children, as he had none of his own, and who to him were dearer than they? Whatever savings he had that went to Tota Koul's daughters by turns. He came to believe that they were

as good as his own children. Little he knew that time suffers its vicissitudes. He spent himself out for Tota Koul's family till the children grew up. After getting married, they rose to high posts. Then, the household began to crack up. The eldest son got posted outside the valley and those who remained there, did not click and were riven by different interests, and took to separate hearths. For the sake of maintaining a semblance of a 'father's home' for the daughters, he lived with the younger son of Tota Koul and handed over to him whatever little he had retained. He kept for himself just a piece of carpet, a 'takiya' (a prop-pillow) and a pipe-hookah that belonged to Tota Koul.

Now he got decrepit from his old age, with no money to fall back upon, the younger daughter-in-law snatched away the carpet from under his feet, the 'takiya' that he rested his back upon was also removed, and the pipe-hookah, too, was shoved down the window, Ved Maam, for the first time in his life, felt his back well-nigh broken. All said and done, what remained with him, was an empty pocket, a tattered woollen garment and a torn to shreds blanket, which covered him when he died.

Ved Maam left the house for Tota Koul's eldest daughter, but how long could she feed him? Nobody cares for anybody, not even one's own off spring, born of one's own flesh and blood, leaving aside those who are not so related. There, too, despair benumbed his heart, and left for Tota Koul's second son. But empty hands are never welcome, they, too, did not put up with him for long; how could one take up an extra burden when one feeds even one's ownself with difficulty. He left this place also and kept going to for a couple of days to this one and then to another. His health was running down, and it irked him to move about. Then, at long last, he reconciled to put up at the Shivaala.

All his life, Ved Lal did ill to nobody, on the contrary, he did all he met a good turn. The days when he afforded so, he even cast pearls before the swine, and kept himself at everybody's disposal.

Maam Kak was the bride's father only in name, it was in fact Ved Maam who saw to his daughter's marriages. Ramjoo was sued by the in-laws of his own son, it was Ved Lal whom he sought for consultation to find a way out. But nobody remembered all this in the end.

Babaji was still propped up against the window sill of Mala Los, taking counsel with his own self as to what would happen next. He got enmeshed in all this for no fault of his. But what could he do? He could not keep him in the *Dharamshala* for long. He again took counsel with Mal Los. He suggested that he should send a word to Tota Koul's younger son so that he might arrange something. He went there, but his wife told him that he had left for the office, and that it would be conveyed to him provided he was home early. Babaji was disgusted at this and went to the temple-priest hoping that he might find a way out. There he was told that he had been to some match-making and that it would take him long to return.

Discouraged, he returned for Mala Los's and sat there for a while and then he returned to the *dharamshala*. There he saw Heer Hyad sitting at the threshold, staring at the corpse with wishful eyes. She burst into tears. Babaji told her that he had been there for the last three days, knowing that nobody was allowed to stay there for more than two days, yet he did not press him to leave as he seemed unwell. Babaji told her that he had perceived that his days were numbered, although he did not believe that he would die so soon. He continued to narrate that early at dawn that day, when he had gone to arrange fire, he had seen the door shut and he had looked through the window bars, he had found him unconscious there. He had flung the door open by kicking hard at it and there he had found him dead. He further told her that since morning many people had come to have a look and had left and it has occurred to none that he was to be given a bath and cremated. "Now tell me some way out. What should I do"? Babaji asked Heer

Dyad.

Heer Dyad was physically present there, but she was lost in unknown rumination. Addressing Babaji, she said, "For all he did, he came out to be a pauper in the end. He had taken birth only to drudge for Tota Koul's household and that he did. It was his fate, how could it be helped? And then, it is what is in store for all. In his dealing with, he did all a good turn, but in the long run, nobody did anything for him. He was always under the impression that the spiced rice and fried fish would accompany him when he died, but alas, nothing accompanies one to the other world. O Babaji, nothing accompanies there. These are mere cravings of one's eyes. And then he heeded not when admonished. He would not leave Tota Koul, how he trusted him, he thought that his children might stand by him in his old age. Little he knew that he might be forsaken to the buffets of fortune. How could you help men when their own wits fail them?"

Babaji was perplexed at her reply for it was not what he had asked her, still he asked her, "Mata, tell me what to do?"

Heer Dyad reassured him that all would come right. "You go to call my priest and get the necessary materials along". She stood there transfixed on the threshold looking up at the skies. How unrelievably blue it was! Heaving a sigh, she began to reflect. She remembered the moment when she got in the straits in her tender youth and how Ved Lal came to assist her unstintedly. Then she remembered how it was again the same Ved Lal who forgot his own self at her daughter's marriage and how he settled the whole affair. What tales were tagged on to him for having done all this! How the people's tongues ran! They said everything imaginable. However, nothing stuck to her, she was none the worse for all that ... Heer Dyad was reminded of many other incidents. But it was since, may be thirty or forty years. Ved Lal had got on in years since. His decrepitude was partly because of the want of his peace

of mind and he was consumed by worries, and partly he was not strong enough to move about. He had given up visiting people, leave Heer Dyad alone. Oh, what besides our mortal bodies! Death overwhelms all the living.

Meanwhile, Babaji came along with Shivboy and the necessary things. Mali Los brought the bathing plank and the shroud. The corpse was given a bath, and after the obsequies, was laid on the plank.

Heer Dyad asked them to wait while she hastened to her home. The people gathered there were surprised at her doing so. After a while, she returned along with a 'Ram-Ram' sheet of cloth and asked them to lay it over the dead body. She had acquired the sheet and got it dipped in the waters of the Ganges after praying to many. She had got it for herself when she would die, but now she laid it over Ved Lal. People became inquisitive, but at such a juncture, it was not deemed fit to gossip and kept mum.

It was evening, and Ved Lal was carried to the cremation ground. Babaji led the party, although there were only a few persons, and in the dark, nobody could see whether a tear was shed by anyone.

Those who had been there at the Shivalan to watch the spectacle, left after washing their faces at the water tap. Heer Dyad alone remained there till the last and left the place without washing her face.

The next day at day-break, as the gossiping women at the watering place were going to pour water on the Shivnaath at the Shivaalan, one of them said to the other, "Now sister, did you see that it was not for nothing that he was being traduced? See, how the whole thing was unveiled, but after forty years".

"Yes, of course, such things never remain a secret for ever — these things come to light, sooner or later", the other said.

Nirvana

Awtar Krishan Rahber

The man who perhaps was called Gotam, set out on a long road which had been covered with tar, the pitch dark coal tar. The tar has melted in the sweltering heat. His molten silver is seething, and his mouth is foaming. He begins to tread swiftly here in this Bharatvarsha, turning his eyes back forth again and again. His silvery frame is seething and his mercurial self is all the more ill at ease.

His father, Sudarshan or perhaps Sadhudana, whatever his name, is quite well off, being an owner of a couple of big mills, which give off tremendous clouds of smoke daily, and along with its smoke, turn goods worth lacks and crores of rupees day in day out. Sadhidana thinks that Gotam will take over the

management of the mills and become its proprietor and install Gautam Nagar by the side of Jamshid Nagar, or alternatively fight an election in the Harijan settlement and become the minister. But both the plans ran aground half way; the mills getting closed due to lock out and the Harijans opting for a candidate from their own fraternity. Sadhudan did it with undiminished zeal and Gotam is witnessing all this wideeyed. He is leaving the palace to wander about. Yashu, lying on the bed, is staring at the door for Gotam to return. But Gotam is proceeding apace. The fever in the sun is on the increase and the congealed mercury in Gotam makes rise. He moves on, turning his eyes all around again and again.

Chhak ... chhak ... chhak ... This is the railway station. Chokeful trains are moving to and fro. Innumerable shadows move back and forth, and some of them look transfixed as if frozen. Oh this noise! All this deafens Gotam's ears. A couple of shadows moves out of a first class compartment, lunches at the platform, throwing crumbs of bread, banana peels and bones into the nearby drain. Forty to fifty shadows, without a head-dress and tattered fall at the crumbs, in a bid to worst one another to dredge the soiled and defiled crumbs and peels to fill their bellies. The couple from the first class compartment is amused at this. Gotam's mercury registers a fall and congeals. Heaving a sigh, he says: "This samsaar is an abode of miseries". Then he plods on.

The couple in the first class compartment is still laughing in their mind, perhaps they are newly wed. Yashu rose in his memory, Yashu who could not bear parting from his even for a moment. "Yashu might be waiting for me", he falls thinking, but all of a sudden he catches sight of a middle aged man attired in a "Bangladeshi" coat, worn out canvas shoe and shabby creaseless pants. "Why is he so overwrought"? The question raises its head in Gotama. "Hey, brother, what has happened to him"? Gotama asks a man standing nearby.

“He wanted to take his own life”, he replied.

“What then”?

“He did not die”.

“Why not”?

“He took poison three times upto now”.

“Do you speak in truth”?

“Strange! Do I lie then”? he says in a raising anger. Gotam’s wits fall him, making out nothing. “What else then”, he asks him again, he replies “the non availability of an unadultrated poison”. Gotama heaves a sigh. Getting somewhat shocked, he says, “This Samsar is an abode of miseries”. He starts plodding again.

He is approaching the Employment Exchange. A multitude of limbs, numberless tired out and exhausted ones with unpolished boots on, holding out their degree certificates, with an uncropped jungle of hair on their heads; their hearts grown heavy as huge lumps of stone, their eyes like flickering out oil lamps, paled out pictures. He sighs and involuntarily says, “This Samsaar is an abode of miseries”. He plods on with wearied out legs. The iron in him wears thin. He has forgotten his place, but Yashu’s big kohled eyes keep exercising their magnetic pull on his inner self. Not being able to decide which way to go, his eyes come to a sudden halt. Yashu, he feels, is constantly calling him to herself; that loving comely, that cool shade-giving tree. Yashu, who could never swallow a morsel without him.

He turns his face towards his palace so that he could get a glimpse of her silken hair, only to forget himself for a while by getting absorbed in the fragrance of her hair Gotama plods

onwards, reaches a dispensary. A child is bitterly weeping for hunger. What has all happened to him? May be his mother is dead. But no, his mother is taking him in her lap. What else then?

“Well, mother, if he is asking for milk, why don’t you give him a suck”?

“He has sucked me dry, dear”, she replied in return, “there is nothing more left”.

Gotam cast his eyes from mother to the child and then back to the mother. The doctor examining a patient looks towards him, and Gotam stares at the doctor. “You seem to be simple”, the doctor says taking pity on Gotam and takes a journal from a shelf behind. “Take a look at it”, the doctor says to Gotam, opening the journal, “See this mother”.

“Yes, she looks hale and hearty”? Gotam says feeling happy. “But do you see the child also”?

“Yes, I do. It is weeping. Why does not its mother suckle it”?

Gotam asks him, touched to his quick. “Her breasts are full of milk”.

“Ha...ha...ha”. The doctor is siezed with an uncontrollable laughter.

“I was not far wrong in regarding you a simpleton”.

“Come, now, you do not tell me why does not the mother give him a suck”. Gotam asked him still more baffled.

“Her milk is poisoned, how can it be served”?

“Poisoned”?

"Yes, without doubt".

"How can this be? A mother's milk turning into poison! No, never. "Gotam remonstrated"

The doctor's eyes move to D.D.T and starts examining the patient again. Gotam heaves a sigh, still making out nothing and lets out without a restraint, "This Samsar is an abode of miseries".

He plods on, but not towards the palace now but in the opposite direction. He paces taking nimble steps on and on, thinking whether Yashu, too, will not suckle their dear one. Overtaken with despair, he walks on and on, with a face distraught, trodding deep in the tarry mud, and corroding the silver within him. Far away, a big and broad tree, but one that was hollowed out, comes to his sight. He fels like sitting under its shade to meditate. He is inclind to meditate for many a day. But Yashu's enchanting big eyes do not let his mercurial self to concentrate on any one thing. Meanwhile a tingle from a cycle bell wakes him. ... A man with a telegram. He gets happy. A telegram from Yashumati!

He opens the telegram in a hurry and reads it out impatiently. "Dear Gotam, may you live long! May your mission be crowned with success! I pray for you. Do not worry at all for me. I am married to the mill manager".

The telegram falls down Gotam's hand. He tries to close his eyes to lose himself in meditation.

The telegram man paddled his cycle on and its revolving wheels leave two serpentine imprints extending far out on the long tarred road.

The Vacuum

Ali Mohamad Lone

This vacuum! Endless and vast, only ever-increasing in extension day after day.

This vacuum, to be sure, does not exist in space outside the earth, but it is there in my heart and head, one that will never get filled in the rotation of day and night.

A meaningless phenomenon.
It is daybreak and there is light.
It is evening and there is nightfall.

That the day has worn on and the night has also ended, are immaterial to me as I cannot think at all.

I am not an introvert, despite my friend's tagging this epithet on to me, I have not the gift of gab like they.

Introvert! I feel like laughing at being accosted thus, not actually laughing, but a mere smile creeping over my lips, keeping mum notwithstanding that. There is no way out but to keep mum when you do not know how to talk.

The thing had gained currency among my kith and kin that I am a reserved man, talking only when I must.

"This is what is called wisdom", the elders pass the judgement. "That is conceit", others jeer. "When one reaches the height of wisdom, one gets laconic of oneself", say the less educated friends. I reply to them with slight parting of lips, and that too far from being sarcastic at what they say, but because I find no justification for this silence. Now, this vacuum, how can this be helped? It is ever expanding and so enlarging in extent that the universe itself seems to me shrinking to an atom or less. Who knows what to make of this state of mind.

It is raining today, cooling the surroundings. People shifting their suits for their bush-shirts, but this vacuity of mine is unaffected, unmoved by heat or cold from within or without. When there is no emotion of any sort, the varying expressions of nature have no effect on my mind. The vacuum will be there insentient, lifeless and immobile wall. Let you tell me what the purpose of existence is. Why I am? Why I am not?

These thousands of books; I could not get at the answer of this question even after going through hundreds of philosophies. I ransacked all the religions of the world, all its points of view, only to find my question still awaiting an answer, reaching no conclusion.

That is why I feel myself, my being and existence leading to no

use, without an aim, lifeless. Even a robot or an automaton is possessed of some purpose, constructed with an end in view, which it does in fact fulfill. What I am? Why I am? I never understood that.

People get yoked into chains, fetter of business, those of family, those of social nature and enchained thus, they are oblivious to everything, plod on the path of life donkey like and conclude the journey of life somehow. What then has fallen me? I, too am a prisoner of those chains, but why do I still feel free of those shackles, aloof apart and alone? Do some people really live without these chains?

To leave for the office in the morning, return in the evening, take your meals, listen to radio, read your newspaper, take a stock of your daily provisions, then many other odds and ends besides, G.P. Fund, Insurance, Income Tax, House Rent, deaths and sorrows, births and marriages. Even after taking upon myself all these things, I feel stifled. Despite my not believing in God, the cry often leaves from out of my heart, "Oh my God!"

Meeting an accident recently as I fell down my bicycle, a cry slipped out of me: "Oh my God!"

But when people pulled me up, I showed no feeling like fear, adventure, or lack of calm. As the doctor brought me near the screening plant and stretched out my arm, I cried out merely from my physical pain, my entire frame was sweating. Who knows what the doctor made of it as he with his trembling hands anxiously told me that it looked like a fracture. I burst out laughing at the doctor's anxiety. The doctor was taken by surprise at my laughing thus. Then as they put me on the platform, of the X-Ray machine and stretched my arm, I shrieked out with pain. The doctor said warily, "It looks like two fractures are there".

"Only two?" I laughed aloud.

The doctor got angry and said, "My dear man, why do you take it so lightly? It will take your bones at least three months to come right".

"Three months only! tsu, tsu!"

I do not know why I got dejected at hearing that, the doctor felt my head also and said, "you may have an head injury also". I remained silent now. How could I tell that fat head that the head could be injured only if it had a power to think, an inane skull could not be injured at all.

I got all the more disappointed as I saw the X-ray film, the bones of the arm were uninjured. The doctor was happy and said, "You are lucky, thank your stars".

"Oh....!"

At least one opportunity to live sometime somewhat different from the daily rounds of routine had presented itself, that too I missed because of my ill luck. To keep your arm curbed under plaster, to lie on the snow-white and warm bed of the hospital, a romance which my fate denied me, and this mumskull of a doctor telling me, "You are very lucky, thank your stars". Idiot!

People, for want or lack of some materials, expend their dear lives in availing themselves of such things, but I suffer from no want of any material sort, absolutely none. What I suffer from is an inner lack, in having no feelings like fear, happiness, grief, romance, love or hate.

The wise people say that man does not live on bread alone; one's daily meals, water and other things like that keep a man alive. But there is something very different in human constitution which needs food of a different kind and variegated. Sometime

before, I was aware of the truth, and so I read books, wrote stories, acted out roles in dramas, listened to songs, went to see the films, attended clubs and social gatherings, hobnobbed with people, laughed and wept with others ... all this, however, took place in my past. I, now, conduct myself entirely differently; finding all that I did quite futile and irrelevant. Reading books only exhausted my brains, my stories only tangled and wrapped my own life-story, dramas are nothing but imitation, singing without an understanding drives you crazy; films to no purpose, and club-going a mere hypocrisy. Attended social gatherings and laughing and weeping with others is mere formality. I shall even make bold to say that I find even my living with my family members a formality.

What is it then, that I want? ... Nothing at all, but still this vacuum in my head and heart devours me sometimes. Would that it were filled in, somehow. One might then ask what is needed to fill in the vacuum ... love from somebody? Affection from others? Sympathy from others? Granted that all these things are provided and the vacuum is not filled in, what is one to do? ... Ugh!

I am not even fed up with this! To be fed up were also a feeling, which could fill this emptiness of mine this way or that. ... Oh my God. Is there any remedy for this vacuity in one's head and heart?

It might be raining, creating a coolness in the surroundings so refreshing and soothing to the body. To be lying in bed under a white quilt in such cold is not less than a luxury, available only to those who wait for the daybreak as the night is over. But what shall one do in whose fate to wait is not in store? Where shall he go to?

Oh, this misery!

Oh, this vacuum of mine! Would that it were filled in somehow!

It is Night Yet

Hari Krishan Koul

How cold! It is as if I were lying on ice-sheets in the sombre Magh. (the tenth month of the Hindu year). The room was too big for us, only three of us as there were. The window was closed but without glass panes. It was raining in torrents outdoor, and the rain was accompanied by the Pantsaal (the mountain range on the South-East of the Valley) wind. Oh what a wind! This biting cold wind of the Pantsaal ran right across that room of the tourist hotel. We had a feel of being in the open, although we were well inside the room.

Our bedding had got thoroughly drenched, covered though by tarpaulin at the top of the bus, and thus, we had hired three blankets for each of us from the *choukidaar*. As for myself, I had stretched

one of these blankets on the wooden plank under me and the remaining ones to cover me up. Makhan had likewise done the same. The Swamiji alone had gone to bed, he had arranged two blankets under him in such a way that he could comfortably squat on them to mediate, and had laid the third one on his knee, he was reading some book.

I was chilled to the bone. Strangely ill at ease with pain in my back, shoulders and haunches, and I simply kept on turning sides. Makhan lay close to me huddled up. Putting my hand on his back, I said to him come close to me so that we can sleep together in an embrace. It might give us some warmth.

He removed my hand from his back with a jerk and tucked himself under the blanket. He was rather angry with me, and his anger, to be frank, was not groundless. On reaching Banihal, the driver had told us that we would put up there that night, and Makhan was the only person to oppose that idea. He had insisted on driver's plying on the bus, regardless of the nightfall, so that we could reach a place proper to have rest. But the driver had perversely declined. Had we joined our voices with that of Makhan, we might have succeeded in forcing the driver to ply the bus. But he had chosen to remain mum. It might well have been that most of the passengers had felt scared of crossing the Banihaal mountain, all the more so because the driver himself, whose responsibility it was to drive, was not agreeable to the idea of crossing the Banihaal. Makhan had a long argumentation with him, but only to yield in the long run. He was thus much more angry with the passengers than with the driver.

I could by no means bring myself to sleep. I got up and sat with my back to the wall. I cast a glance towards the Swamiji who was mediating on something with the book besides him.

"What is the matter?" he asked, raising only his eyes to me.

"Is is piercingly cold, Swamiji, I said to him.

He gave a mild laugh asking, "How is it you feel so cold? As for myself, I do not feel any".

"How on earth is he to feel cold, God having made him so bulky with such layers of fat!" Makhan said in a muffled tone so that I alone could hear him. The Swamiji irritated him more than any other. The Swami had got down the bust at Ramban and disappeared, nobody knew where, and thus wasted a precious half an hour, hard pressed though we were, for time. Had he not wasted his half an hour, we might have crossed the Khooni Nallah before the landslide and we might have been at home quite comfortably. Makhan set down all the anxiety we were in to Swamiji. But we could attribute it to some other possibility that did not occur to Mkahan : Swamiji might have had an intution that the landslide was to take place and he got the bus stopped for half an hour at Rambhan; had he not done, our bus too, in all probabilioty might have rolled down the hill when hit by the landslide. Who could say? It is said that all that God does, does it for the good of man.

I covered myself up again with the two blankets and tried to sleep, but it was far from me! The pain in my shoulders and haunches grew worse and i got all the more restless. On the one hand, my whole frame was bristling with cold, on the other hand, my heart was overtaken by a weird terror; I had for the first time in my life seen hill sliding down, a portion of the landslide was already there at the Khooni Nalla. As we were staying there, talking, a few pebbles rolled down, but we took no notice of it. What made us apprehensive was that the narrow fissures in the rocky mountain were broadening right before our eyes. Then a frightful thunder lowered and the whole mountain began to roll down. We gave a shriek and moved back. Having moved back, we witnessed an entire portion of the mountain flowing down like a cascade of water and vanishing deep below, big rocks splitting, entire pine trunks

sliding down pellmell with clay and stone. A big dread had seized me and I was not getting over that even then.

The road had been cleared after six hours, but in its wake came an incessant heavy downpour, which even upto then did not look like stopping; it was gaining in intensity every movement.

I turned my side, bringing my knees close to the belly and my hands between the knees. Outside, the heavy down-pour showed no signs of let up and the cold wind kept rushing in and out the tourist hotel rooms. I felt the plight of those who preferred to stay in the bus far better than ours.

Suddenly, the current failed, augmenting my terror further. The dread seemed reigning all around. Treading softly, I went towards the Swamiji.

"Swamiji, this biting cold! This pitch black darkness, this rain, and the storm! Are we to get petrified right here? Are we fated to die like this?" I said to him plaintively, almost in tears.

He rolled the scroll, and put it in his bag, and drawing a stump of a candle stick and lit it up. Its light spread in the room, casting over shadows on the wall. The frame was flickering in the wind and our shadows on the wall were also tremulous.

Swamiji rubbed my face with his hand and said, "What are you afraid of? All is false, an illusion".

What was illusion, I did not take him in.

"This night, this darkness, this cold, all such things are dreams".

But I feel all of this to be real". I really felt surprised.

"How does this matter?" Swamiji said with a mild laugh.

"Doesn't all that we see in dreams look real?"

"Yes, it does," I gave my assent in a nod.

"In the same manner, this room, these windows without glass panes, this rain and this biting wind are illusory like a dream. As you get up in the morning, these hills, this journey, and the fellow-travellers will no longer be with you".

He got up and slipped his feet into the shoes. He opened the door and probably went to make water. I too, got up, but soon returned to my place. Swamiji's words gave me much consolation, and by and by, the weight of the fear began to lift from my heart. In fact, fear is not from without in man's surroundings, but within his mind. What is needed is to keep a balance within.

While I was reflecting over this, Makhan moved his head out of the blanket and asked, "What was he telling you? All this is a dream?" I nodded in assent.

"You should have asked him who it is who dreams. He? You? Or all of us together dream a common dream?"

He again tucked himself completely under the blanket and slept. I was left all alone. Meanwhile, the candle was out with a gust of wind and I was overtaken by awe. The awesome scene of the hill came again before my eyes, and I, too, slipped under the blanket and tried to sleep. But who could sleep under the stress of anxiety? I got up and lit a cigarette.

"Would that it were a dream". I began to reflect with myself. "But this it were" doesn't mean anything. It is doubtlessly a dream. What Swamiji said is not wrong. If it is not a dream, what else is it then? Take this very Makhan and the Swamiji, to wit, whenever did I know them upto now? But my world now is confined to these

two persons alone. Then as I reach home tomorrow, or as I wake up tomorrow, as the Swamiji would like to put it, how shall they exist for me?"

I touched my left arm with the lighted cigarette, I did really feel a burning sensation .. But what does mere sensation matter? We can feel anything, we can sense dryness for what is wet, or vice versa. What is apparent is not in fact real.

I gave a nudge to Makhan and he got up. I asked him, "Makhan, can you say what reality is?"

"The reality is that we are cowards". He was as if ready with an answer. "Do you know why the driver decided to stay here for the night? He stayed here because he shall get a halage, he will earn money, yes. It matters little to him that we get congealed with cold; only his self interests matter with him. He will enjoy himself. What is really deplorable is that we stood merely helpless before him".

"What if it is only a dream? What have you to stay to it?" But he was pat with a answer to this question also, "Let us agree to it be even a dream, but had we all joined our voices. We would by now have been in our cozy beds at our respective homes. This dream would not have turned out at a bad one for us!"

I got all the more lost. "It is possible that we are cowards, as he puts it, or that it turns out only a dream on waking, as Swamiji would have it, these mountains, this rain, this biting cold, and this wind will be no more there, but it is long before it will be morning ... It is night yet. Presently, it is dark and cold. And of those two, there, one has tucked himself under the blanket suddenly in a huff, and the other is impervious to cold, and he does not still return from the open outside.

An Offensive Tale

Hari Krishan Koul

The great God be thanked that I came by a taxi right at my doorstep. I asked the driver to move straight to the college and I had a look in the mirror fixed in front of the driver. My ears were still smeared with soap-lather, and I wiped it with my hanky. A knot of my necktie had got under a wing of my collar which I put right. It was three minutes to ten as I looked at my watch, and my class would start at exact ten. I thought that I would be late that day also as I was wont to. That day, too, I should have to put up with my boss scoldings.

The taxi driver left me at the college gate at three past ten. I thought that the boss would be there in front of the college, and it would be prudent to enter the class-room unnoticed from the

backside. But as ill luck would have it, the boss was there talking to the professors in the lawn in the backside. I was not aware of his presence, I almost jumped over the rungs of the stairs, went straight into the class and wrote about the day's topic on the black board. All of a sudden, there was a sort of commotion there. As I looked towards the students, they were bursting with laughters. The only girl student in the class had cast her head down. Admist this pendamonium, one of the boys got up and pointed out to my legs. I, too, looked at my legs, ... and I felt as if I was hurled down from the skies, I had put on my shirt all right, my coat also, my neck-tie, too, all right, but had forgotten to put on my pants in the flurry while leaving the college.

I at once bundled myself in the chair and hid my legs behind the desk. I felt as if my life was slipping out of me through those very legs, and I would drop dead right there. I clung to the desk desperately and I was all sweat. I would not bring myself to think the pass I had come to. Granted that I Suffer from amnesia, now forgetting my pen, and then my hanky, and this too that sometimes, after boarding a tonga, I recollect that I carry no money with, but this! Never!! ... What a come down today!!!

To be at the college, that too, without your pants on is not a pardonable crime. And then in a college where girls also study beside the boys! No punishment is too great for this. "But how shall I agree to my being a culprit? I asked myself". I have not come here nacked on purpose. To see to it whether I have put on my pants was not my task alone; others also were obliged to see to it. Agreed that I forgot to do it myself, were not others bound to remind me of this? I alone am not culpable, others, too, are to blame; the taxi driver could have reminded me of my nackedness while I sat in his taxi. But then, why should he have bothered? He was concerned with his fare only. Again, the people at college gate were also duty-bound. I can recollect that as soon as I entered the college gate, he wanted to say something, but I had remained silent.

It is possible that he was scared of meddling in others affairs. Four months back he had reported that the girl with Roll No. 7 of the final year and a professor were performing practicals till late in the Chemistry laboratory. But the professor was none the worse for it, the peon's pay was withheld for two months for misreporting ... But still he should have whispered in my ear that I was naked, and I could not have the guts to complain of him to the boss. But he was afraid. It passes one's understanding why a man is afraid of things, even where it is uncalled for".

I, too, perhaps am afraid without there being a need to be. I should in fact have been afraid had I harboured an evil intent, if I had intentionally been to the college naked. My conscience on the contrary was clear. Then for forgetfulness some allowance is to be made, as it cannot be helped. The boss, too, once left his watch at his home, and if that was not considered blameworthy, why should blame be attached to me? Costwise his watch would be worth three to four hundred, and my pants worth hardly thirty. I thought.

I did not take up a new lesson with the class, I instead asked them to jot down, without any noise, the previous day's lesson in their note books. They took to writing in their note books, and I looked out through the glass panes of the window. There were many professors standing outside my class-room. I looked again to make sure if they had encircled me on the boss' asking. Clearly enough, the boss had seen me in that plight and had got me detained there. He himself was there at some distance from the professors, thinking something over. As he went to his own room, one professor said to the other, "I will let you know all that happened then. I was wise on my part that I put on my pants at once. She, too, put on an act and simulated unconsciousness for still some time. What could they discover as they came in! They felt abashed. What I mean to say is that keep your doing from others' sight is a must, not the tactlessness like that of his!"

Another professor, an elderly one, at that added, "Right, may God save every one from exposure".

I had a mind that I would right from there yell that I needed nobody to keep me from exposure. I had not committed any sin. If only senses had not taken leave of me, I would for certain have put on my pants; I would readily swear on it, anywhere they like. The truth of the matter is that I had to keep awake twelve-thirty because of an anxiety. It was for this that I woke up rather late. Despite this, I had finished shaving myself, taking a bath, having my meals only upto nine. I put some change in my coat pocket. By way of preparation, I had put in the pocket a cigarette packet, matchbox, a handkerchief and a fountain pen. And then I had a mind to have a look at that day's lessons. This watch of mine behaves well till it is nine, but after that, God knows why, takes a single leap from nine thirty to quarter to ten. I had got conscious of it many a time. That morning, too, the watch had taken a leap as it were. I had put off my pajamas and shirt I wore at my home, and put on a new shirt, arranged my tie, slipped my arms in the coat sleeves and left. My intention was not to miss my class, and not to let th boys free. If they were let loose, they were left unattended, they might resort to arson, strike crackers and very likely start an agitation that might set the whole country ablaze; the Government might get disturbed, its interests might be in jeopardy, as a government servant my interests being identical with its own. I had flurried because of this ... May this hurry be confounded!

The Boss came out of his room to the professors who were encircling me. He told them, "I had been to the Hon'ble minister's and he told me that he would be arriving in due time".

The ground under my feet began to slip. It had never dawned on me that the matter had a necessity to be informed and that whatever happens in the college had to be reported to the Minister. "However, I will admit my mistake before him ... not the mistake,

forgetfulness rather. Everybody suffers from this ailment after thirty five years. I will remind him that, soon after assuming power, a few years back, he had held out a promise that he would extirpate corruption and lawlessness, but after taking over power he forgot to keep his promise, his hands being very full. But his intentions were clear. Had he remembered that he undoubtedly would have rooted out corruption and lawfulness. By the same token, had I remembered, I would have put on my pants, God forbid, I had harboured no evil designs as he had not any".

All of a sudden, somebody's sound of weeping reached my ears. I looked up and saw the solitary girl in the class shedding tears. She had been weeping piteously. I got up and went to her, being myself highstrung, I held her head close to my bosom and began to weep too. Both of us kept crying for long. Then she got up and wiped off my tears with her *sari*. She then took up this very *sari* and handed it over to me. But I drew back and taking my seat in the chair, told her, "Do you take me for so shameless a creature", that I will hide my nakedness with your *sari* after laying you bare? I am not that man! Is your sari the only thing left to me in the world to hide my shame with? Do not be perturbed and weep not. Leave it to me, and see how I find a way out"

The Boss sent for two to four more professors and bolstered up my encirclement still more. He said to them, "We cannot enter the class under rules. As he leaves the class after the bell is rung, we will start taking action. It is likely that Hon'ble Minister will also arrive by then". Looking to his watch, he said, "There are still fifteen minutes for the bell to go".

I on my part, also looked at my watch. It was ten eighteen. The bell goes at ten forty and there were still twenty minutes. The Boss lies outright that there are only fifteen minutes. He is deliberately bereaving me of those seven minutes. I thought, I was fully convinced that they were being hostile to me intentionally.

I decided with myself that I would never let go those precious seven minutes, come what may. "I would not give up my right. They may for aught I care, strike the bell after fifteen minutes, but I shall leave my class after twenty two minutes exact". I was astonished why not a single one among the so many professors did not say to the Boss that his watch did not keep correct time, that there were still twenty two minutes. Why no one among them felt sympathetic to me? Well, if not so minded what prevented them from speaking the truth? Nobody would take them to task for that! I saw with these very eyes of mine that, as the Boss said that it, was fifteen minutes to ten, four or five professors set their watches by moving the hands seven minutes more.

"Let them keep their sympathy, let them withhold the truth. What harm can they do me? My strength rests with my students. If they are pleased with me, I will escape unscathed. I teach them well, put in hard work for them .. I will ingratiate myself still more with them today. They will understand that I alone have sympathy and good will for them. I will also tell them point-blank what happens to their dear money in the college; how their games fund is embezzled; in fact lay bare everything. Boys re the slumbering lions and I will wake them up. On waking, whosoever's blood they take in a draught is not my bother. If nobody bothered on my account, why should I do so? A smile crept over my lips and I got up. I cleared my throat after a cough and said, "Boys, the fees that you pay is in part taken by the Government, but a lion's share of it remains in the college. This money is called the college fund, and, you know, this money should rightfully be spent for the welfare of the college and the students. But how deplorable it is that this does not happen. Do you at all know, what happened to the money?"

Yes, we do know, one of the students yelled.

"Bravo!" I made that boy stand up, "I thought you were asleep but you are more awake than I. I am pleased with you. Now tell

me what happens to the college fund?"

"I get five rupees and a quarter everyday," (quarter here refers to liquor), he replied and took his seat.

"You may well be getting, but everybody here doesn't get it". I said losing my temper.

"I get a cup of tea and two eggs everyday", another student got up and said.

"I get ten rupees and a cinema ticket at every weak-end", said a third boy.

"We get money for cigarettes", said the rest of the boys standing up. I felt humbled, I had thought out many things in my mind. I had a suspicion that the money was grabbed by the boss. Little I knew that the students' money was spent for them only. I heaved a sigh and, getting worsted, turned to the class.

"Then, it means that everybody comes by something?" All the boys yelled together.

"Do you also get something?" I asked the sole girl student.

"No", she shook her head and I again took heart.

"Why do you not get it? Do you not pay your fees? Why are you dealt with so unjustly, you struggle for your right and I am with you".

"Can she resort to arson?" One of the students got up and asked me.

"No", I replied.

"Can she strike the crackers?" Another student asked me.

"No", I said again.

"Why talk then?" He laughed boisterously and sat down.

I stopped talking and shrank into my chair. I looked at my watch, it was twenty three minutes past ten. According to my calculations, there were still seventeen minutes, but only ten according to the boss' watch. He would make them strike the bell after ten minutes. If I chose to remain in the class, the boys would not agree. They would run away as soon as the bell went. Soon after they left, some professors would enter through the door, and still others through the windows, and catch hold of me. They might bind me with the chair. I continued thinking, and there after, the Boss would enter and an action would be started against me. It was possible that the Hon'ble Minister might have arrived by then. "In short, I will not be spared". I said to myself.

I looked at the watch again, only nine minutes had remained. "Thereafter, it will be only eight minutes, then only seven .. and then six ..." I thought and shivered with fear. "But no, may be I shall not have to wait till the bell goes. I might give up my ghost even before that ... My life might slip out of me, right here ... on this very chair .. before the bell goes".

Remorse Let Loose

Hari Krishan Koul

Tarzan's sister-in-law (brother's wife) was just regaining her composure; she was panting for breath for puffing and blowing (in order to make fire in the cooking-stove). But the thoroughly drenched conifer faggots and dry dung were not catching fire. The whole corridor was filled with smoke.

"Where is he?" Doctor asked her. She had been overwrought, she got all the more strained. She felt she might be tempted to draw a half-burnt faggot from the oven and give a sound hiding to him and to his friend, both. In this troublesome hour he came so early in the morning to lead her brother-in-law astray. But she soon realized that he was not to blame, when in fact the trouble brew near her own home.

"Is he still in bed?" Doctor read the meaning in her silence and went upstairs. Ascending the flight of stairs, he heard her prattle along, but took no heed to that.

"Get up, you brother-in-law" (a wife's brother, a vituperative accostation customary among intimate pals of the lower middle class) "Pedro has got released," he cried while entering the room.

Tarzan got up with a start, not making out what he said, but apprehending that something grave had taken place.

"His mother is dead", Doctor sat near his pillow. Tarzan opened the window by his outstretched arm and a dim light entered the room. Tarzan was still lying under his guilt. He had laid over it a rag of a blanket and over that spread his 'loochh' (a long garment, 'pheran'). His pillow of red tapestry was coverless and as such had absorbing the oil of his hair for years. On his right lay pictures of the film-fairies, torn from some magazines, and, on his left, was a packet of cigarettes in which lay two full cigarettes and the stump of a used one.

"When?" he asked Doctor.

"In the early morning today, it is said".

Doctor took a cigarette from Tarzan's packet and lit it up with his *Kongri* (a portable earthen pot contained in a wicker-work covering used to hold live coals for warmth under the *pheran* in winter).

"But I guess she might have passed away during the night and the 'brother-n-law' was not aware of that till morning. He might have been enjoying himself".

"How mean he is! Doing it without us!"

"I myself am not aware of this. I heard that they were confounding themselves at the *patwaar's* (a keeper of lad records). Some unknown strangers had been at his there."

"O, I will tell you, he will get ruined. Who led him to that place? I say '*mwangi paty*' (a gambling game of cards) goes on there day and night ... Give me a cigarette also". Doctor gave him one from his (Tarzan's) packet.

"Give me the Kangri also", Doctor gave that to him. Tarzan lit up a cigarette and took the kangri under his quilt. "What is left to him now? The mother that the only one he had to him, has also kicked up her bucket. Let him dispose of his house too and play *mwangi pety*".

"Do you think he will do otherwise?"

"What now? What are we do to do?"

"Which else of his 'brother-in-laws' will carry her to the cremation ghat? Come, let's gird up our loins".

"Ours are already girded up. Who else's fathers and mothers burden are we to carry?"

Tarzan got up and put his *loochh*, lifting up a comb from a shelf did his hair backwards and wrapped up his head in a muffler, slipped his feet into three or four socks that were put together under the pillow. Handling the *kangri* over to Doctor he said to him, "Proceed, we are ready".

"Wait till I finish the cigarette".

Doctor stirred the ashes in the *Kangri* with his hand and then wiped his hand with the *pootsh* (a linen garment under the pheran).

"Yes, gladly, if there was no hurry to the old woman uptil now, can't she wait a little further?"

Tarzan took the Kangri left there the night before and gave it a shaking so that the unburnt coals therein came to the surface. Getting an ember or two from Doctor's kangri, he blew into it.

"Will you not put fresh coals into it?" Doctor asked him.

"We shall get a shovelful or two outside at the bakers. Why to get a scolding for mere kangri coals from somebody? Well, did you listen to the score?"

"Who 'the brother-in-law' knows!"

"If they get six wickets today, it is sure, they shall win".

"Oh, as if they are going to win!" Doctor showed him his closed fist. (a prurient gesture). As if they ever won anywhere so that this one place alone remains there for them to win".

Both of them went down pussy-foot and left the corridor silently. Tarzan's sister-in-law, after she gave a wash to the threshold, let out a prattle, half in Urdu and half in Kashmiri. "How is he concerned? It is not even dawn yet, and he leaves with an air of a Babu, with hair dressed up with fragrant oil.. Taking utensilfuls of rice, never caring wherefrom it comes. It is I who is to suffer..."

"O, you, where has this exotic lark been picked up by your brother?" Doctor asked Tarzan while walking.

"Well, he got it somehow. I do not think we shall come by any, even this sort".

"May be, you will not get any, I am already in love". Tarzan

sizing him up head and foot, told him, "As if you are really!"

At the market, Tarzan got at the baker's a kangri-full of mulberry-wood coals, borrowed three cigarette packets from the grocer, and said to Doctor, "Now I can carry the whole of the city to the cremation ghat. I am now quite set".

"Did you not enquire about the score at the baker's?"

"The cells of his transmitters were exhausted". He took two cigarettes from a packet, lit up one and handed another to Doctor. Doctor flung away the stump placed behind his ear.

"It was my intention to listen to the commentary this Sunday, but who knew of this drudgery coming? When do you think we shall be free?"

"At one or two, possibly".

"Shall we listen to the commentary or..." Tarzan got reminded of something, and asked Doctor, "What sort is that there up?"

"Sheer nonsense!"

"So boring!"

"Then what sort is that one there?"

"Who knows! It started only yesterday".

"And that one there at the other side?"

"They say it is good."

"If we are free before one, we shall go there or we shall listen to the commentary."

"Do you think they will win?"

"If they win, I will make you enjoy yourself; I swear by you".

When Pedro saw that Dyad (his mother) had passed away, he gave out some wails and went straight to Pahalwaan's. Pahalwaan went first to Seth's with the message and then to the priest. On the way, he saw doctor's brother and sent a word through him to Doctor. Seth took fifty rupees or so Mritya Saamagri Bandaar to get the shroud etcetra. When he returned with the material, Pedro then mounted out his wails, which gathered a few neighbours from the mohalla.

Pedro had no relatives in the city excepting the husband of one of his cousins on the maternal side, and that too five or six miles away. He sent him no word. And he would not come, had he even sent him the message. Pedro knew it for certain. He had a loathing for all his relatives of the city and the village alike. The truth was that Dyad alone had bound him to his relatives. With her demise, every tie dissolved. He was released not only in one form, but on all accounts. Now he was not bound to do any 'namaskaars' on his relatives, not to perform 'shraad' ceremony to his father; and not to return home every evening; he will do as pleased him He was his own master, the master of his house.

Pahalwaan came after an hour accompanied by the priest. A woman from the neighbourhood set a pot of water on the heating oven meant to giving the last bath to the dead.

They also mud-washed a spot in the compound where the priest asked Pedro to perform the last rites. He was still removing the ceremonial threads, one on the right and the other on the left, when Doctor and Tarzan reached there. Tarzan went over to Pedro and asked him in a whisper in his ear, "Have you got some money?"

"Yes I have got some".

"No, I don't think you have got any Let you swear by this very mother of yours".

"Yes, I swear by her that I have got".

"Alright then". Saying so, he sat on one side of the compound on a stone-mortar. As soon as Dyad was brought for the last bath, he stood up and said to Pahalwaan, "The old woman at last turned out to be selfish. She herself will have a bath with hot water and force poor Pedro to bath in ice-cold water in this chilly winter".

Having washed her, they enshrouded Dyad and put her on the bier. Tarzan and Seth put their shoulder to the front of the bier and Doctor put his shoulder to the third side. When Pahalwaan approached to set his shoulder to the fourth side, Doctor said to him, "You Maslya (Muslim), do not touch the bier, it will get polluted".

"Listen, if she comes to know that a Muslim is setting his shoulder to her, she will jump down from her bier". Tarzan said.

"Well, carry her yourself". Pahalwaan drew back. "But the kaawuj (the man meant to set fire to the pyre) is always a Muslim!"

"How should you bother yourself", Seth told him.

At last a boy in the neighbourhood took the bier on the fourth side and the journey to the cremation ghat started.

Pedro, accompanied by the Priest, was walking in front carrying the 'kriya phot' (a basket containing oblation material). The Priest was wrapped up head and foot in a blanket. It had irked the priest to have to leave so early in the morning. He thought to himself that a leader could deny, so could a doctor, but a priest could never do so. "Confound this job of ours! And who knows whether this pauper shall pay anything or not!"

Pedro and the priest were followed by Tarzan, Seth, Doctor and the boy from the neighbourhood; they carried the bier. And then there was Pahalwaan, accompanied by a few neighbours; the later went back to their homes only after walking a distance of a hundred yards or so. Pedro followed his nose carrying the 'Kriya Phot'. He had thought sometime back that he had been released

with the death of Dyad, but now he felt that there was no release for him. He was in fact stranded. The knot that anchored him to the shore, got snapped and he was set adrift in the spate of the world, either to get marooned somewhere or get stuck in sands to rot there or remain adrift all his life. Dyad did, of course, cursed him, but prayed for him many a time. She would importune him for household expences, but also pay him on her own for cigarettes as the month fagged out. She would at times be sullenly in a huff with him, but then she held him in an embrace also. Nobody would get irritated by him, nor would he be missed by anyone. Nobody would be bereaved by his death, nor would he feel bereaved by anyone's death. He was now all alone in the universe and the universe was not strewn with primroses for him.

All of a sudden, as he looked backwards, the ground under his feet as if slipped beneath him; he was literally walking alone with his 'kriya phot'. There was no priest nor were there the undertakers carrying the bier. The 'kriya phot' began to slip from his hand, but he held it fast to his bosom. "May be I am only dreaming or it could also be that the god of death is displaying some of his 'maya' powers!" At last, he saw the priest lightning a cigarette at a shop-keeper's, and he took heart again. "Then, where are the rest of them? Where is Dyad? Have they been swallowed up by the earth or the skies?" The priest came near and said to Pedro, "Some evil is to be betide! Those rescals might have slipped and let the dead fall; it bodes evil".

Pedro had already had premonitions that something bad was to come. The priest had, in fact, said nothing novel, but the question remained as to where had they vanished. Granted that they might have got a fall, but they would not take wings. Something unusual had happened! He thought. The Priest prayed loudly, "Forgive me my faults, hey Shiva Shumbhoo! Hey Mahadeva Shamboo!" The clay lamp in the 'Kriya' Basket had long since extinguished and the half burnt wick was giving a line of smoke. Pedro was bewildered and anxious. In addition a dread weighed his heart

and his bosom heaved turbulantly.

At last, he perceived a slim outline of the bier at a distance and the bier carrying the dead body reached him after a while.

"Three have fallen!" Tarzan cried out as he neared him.

"You say that dead body fell three times? *traahi... traahi...*"

"Oh no, my fighter bowler has taken three wickets".

"Will you now stop!" Seth was biting his lips in chagrin.

"I swear by the Prophet, this is an unbearably acursed attitude". Pahalwan said to Pedro, "Listen, Tarzan's legs got a break at the untidy beetle-seller's shop and said that he would listen to the commentary. We entreated him and the beetle-seller laid his cap under his feet, but his legs would not move. We stopped there for not less than ten minutes. The whole traffic got jammed".

"It was not late for her these seventy years, what do these ten minutes matter!" Tarzan said by way of explanation.

"Ask him to shut his mouth", Seth said, shaking with anger.

"If he does not shut his mouth, I will leave Dyad here and go away".

The Priest pounced upon Pedro, telling him, "Are you human beings or bears? I swear on oath that I will never henceforth ... but who else will die to you now?"

At the cremation ghat, Tarzan, Doctor, Seth, the neighbour boy brought down the load from their shoulders. The 'kaavuj' arranged the pyre. Pedro got busy with the Priest. Tarzan flexed himself and said to the rest of the pals, "Do you hear? This Doctor is in

love".

Pahalwaan and Seth burst out laughing.

"With whom?" Pahalwaan asked.

"I will tell you", Tarzan replied, "He is in love with his lady officer".

The neighbour boy, being a bit younger in age, stood demure.

"This man does all her domestic chore; iron out her clothes, arranges her *dhoti* neat in piles, buys her goods from the market. Are you making any headway or it is merely a love's labour lost?"

Doctor gave him a rebuff, "I will smash your teeth, stop this nonsense, She is as good as my mother".

"Why are you tormenting him? You yourself go to the press owner's house". Pahalwaan asked Tarzan.

"My foot! Will he make me his manager if I go to his house? I have my self respect, am not your sort who gave a written *chim naami* (a prurient expression, here meaning a written apology).

"Did he really give it? Has he given up his trying to be a leader"? Doctor asked him.

"What else could he do?" Tarzan said. "The police picked him up for that poster affair. But his neighbours and relatives set it afloat that he was arrested for theft and that the pilfered articles were found at his house".

"What else could I do if not give my *maafi naama* (apology)?

"No, not *maafi naama*, say *chim naama*". Doctor put him right and Seth laughed.

"And you Sir Tan Sen Maharaj, when are you now going to sing at the radio station"? Tarzan turned to Seth.

"Hey, do you jest with me. I am not the man to jest with". Seth got lachrymose, and Tarzan, Doctor and Pahalwaan let out a boisterous laugh.

The burning pyre was ebbing low now, the flame was low and the crackle of the embers was on the increase and Pedro, with his head cast down, was absorbed in some rerie.

"Get up, better leave now", Seth put his hand on his shoulder.

"Well, let us go", Pedro got up.

"O, you, we had got rather warm here. Well, let us go", Doctor said.

"What an absurdity, the first forty days of the winter are about to end, but there is no snow yet", Pahalwaan said. "There would have been a thaw if it snowed".

"Where is Tarzan?" Pedro asked. Everybody looked right and left, but Tarzan was nowhere to be seen.

"He might have slipped unseen", Seth said. "The brother-in-law had to listen to the commentary, as if his sisters husbands were playing there".

"He has never so much as taken a bat in his hand. He even does not know what mid on or silly mid on mean, yet he left his pals here for this!" Pahalwaan, being irked said.

"He might not be listening to commentary, he might have gone to cinema instead. Doctor gave his opinion. He had been itching for that right since morning.

Pedro, Doctor and Seth made a *namaskaar* before the pyre and were about to leave when, after taking a pace or two, Pahalwan let out a cry, "Lo, that 'brother-in-law' is there!"

Tarzan was standing there behind the chinar with a fixed gaze at the pyre.

"We thought you gave us a slip a long while", Doctor told him. Tarzan remained silent.

"Are you not leaving?" Pahalwan asked him.

Tarzan continued to remain silent.

"Come, what is there to be obtained now?" Pedro said while tears were welling up in his eyes. Tarzan held him in an embrace and a wail escaped him. "Six years back, I brought my own mother here and got her burnt to ashes".....And both of them fell to weeping piteously like women.

Doctor and Pahalwan got bewildered, but Seth made it clear for them; "This is what is called *shamshaan veeraag* (a feeling of utter misery one has at the cremation ghat) Do not disturb them, let them weep to their full".

A Profound Picture

Hari Krishan Koul

That day, rather that day's begining started on a happy note. After sleeping a full and sound night's sleep. I felt my body, why body alone, my entire being light. During the dark night, I do not know how all my fears and terrors of yesternight dissolved and I felt my inner self as clear as the firmament above.

In the morning itself, the whole day's programme was engraved carefully and in beautiful words on my mind. During the day, I had to take rice at a certain place. Taking rice is a daily routine affair...it was rather a feast at a special place. I had to read out a paper after participating in a seminar. The paper in question took me two days to write, but I gave it out that had taken me two complete months to write it. In the evening, I had to take part in a cultural fair. This

was a day among those special days which happen seldom in life now; the days that give me a feeling that I do really matter, that what I say is esteem and my opinions are valued, or that my life has a meaning.

As soon as I woke up, I switched on my transistor set, the news was about to be broadcast. I thought there would be many pieces of good and harmless news to listen to which was not necessary and which when heard, would not be harmful to forget. The news would probably be like that some African leader of some country had said that India is the largest democracy, or some minister or deputy minister might have said that the prices of some essential commodities were falling; or in some remote corner of America one hundred or so of people might have lost their lives in an air-crash, among whom there would be no acquaintance or any relation of mine.

But that day, on that pleasantly begun day, the radio did not broadcast these or these sort of good news, it broadcast a single news, the only one news which made the ground under my feet slip away.

I never knew! But the radio broadcast that arrangement had been made for my being killed and everything had been settled to this effect. Had my well-wishers not waken up, there would have been at my home my truncated limbless corpse exuding murder. This house, why this house only, in fact the entire country would have been set ablaze. It would be so because it was said here that all the aliens and akin had together in complicity gathered gun-powder and other explosives which might catch fire by a mere breath of mouth and exterminate everything instantly. Thus an ordinance had been issued that people should not open their mouth because words are accompanied by breath and might set the gunpowder aflame. And I was not aware of this for having fallen so soundly asleep! But those solicitous for me got awakened at mid

night for keeping me safe from harm.

This was Aakaashvani. Call it an unseen voice or a bolt from the blue. It made my pleasantly begun day, my feeling of being a man that mattered, my estimable talks and valued opinions all vanish into thin air. All those small and big fears and terrors which my sound sleep had dissolved, rose up again and weighed on my chest as a mammoth terror, leaving me choked and speechless. I did not go to the invitation. How could I go? They might have poisoned my meals to kill me. True, I did go to participate in the seminar, but there was no one; not even those who had arranged it. Only a few persons came to ask me for their whereabouts. But what help could I rendered them when I had lost myself? In fairness to them, they did not pester me at all. But I got anxious...anxious and perplexed also. I recollected that it was time for the news paper. Going through the news paper would not mitigate my anxiety, but it would, sure enough take away some of my perplexity; I would come to know, who that well-wisher of mine was who woke up at the dead of night and who my adversaries were who, to kill me, had whetted their knives and amassed gunpowder to set my house to fire. But that day there was no news paper, so my anxiety and perplexity did not abate.

The cultural fair commenced well in time in the evening. Probably because the hotliers had been given an order in advance and also the earnest money. I am sure if this were not so, the fair might have got cancelled. The people were still assembling in the fair that the tea was served. There was no speech, nor any kind of talk, silence reigned all around. The tea, because of the sipping sounds and crunching of *dal mongra*, seemed all the more hideous. An hour or so passed like this. All the people remained tongue-tied and ate away all they could with the tea. I put up with all this for long remaining speechless. After that, I could bear that no longer. I felt constrained and told them, "O, you eunuchs! Do talk of something, say at least that the tea is good if nothing else, the

samosas have adequate salt. But do talk".

Late in the night, I left for my home. I was not really walking, but my legs, only through share habit, carried my body. On all sides, or it is possible it seemed to me so, there was an air of desolation. During the few hours, people had forgotten to talk aloud, to laugh and what is still more astonishing, to weep even. The road which I had taken, joined a little further with another road. It did not take me long to reach there. I saw, and it got me all the more bewildered, a big gathering of people on the second road. Why only one, but very many, giving utterance to uproarious crying. (What is meant, they did talk as they were wont to till yesterday). Among the multitudes of people, my eyes fell on that man also, wearing that very shirt and pajama he wore daily. (One never knows why). He was smiling with himself and he progressed straight in the direction of his nose. He probably did not catch sight of me. I caught hold of him and asked him, "How is it that you are smiling with yourself?" Why? Is smiling a taboo? he asked me laughingly. "Did you not listen to the radio in the morning", I asked him in addition. "Yes, I did, they just played the old item records and the new one".

"I mean did not you listen to the news?"

"I do not listen to the news".

I simply laughed with myself, that is I opened my mouth an inch and a half which aroused no suspicion as I told him.

"If you had listened to the news, you would have been appraised of many things that took place. What you were yesterday, you are no longer the same".

I began to be overtaken by worry now, he ruminated over what I said for a moment and said then, "Yesterday also I listened the

tape records till nine, and today also I heard them, yesterday also I left with utensil of bath for my work from nine to six and today I will do so as well. Yes, with one difference that yesterday I saw the third show (of film) besides and today I shall go to the circus".

"You had been to see the circus today?" This seemed to be an impossible thing.

"Why we alone? All these people are returning from there". In case a glance on those, all sorts of people, some had taken a liking for one feat and the others for a different one. All happy; well if not so, worrylessly wrapped up in their own affairs.

"You also should see it", he suggested "The new joker is, in particular, worth seeing; what he, in fact, tried was to take a spring from one swing to the other, but the trousers slipped off his legs while doing so". He was smiling because the joker's trousers had slipped off his legs! To laugh like this and that too on this very day pointed to his idiocy. This idiocy of his moved me to tears, but I did not shed any.

"Now are you not to walk down to your home?" he nudged me. I had to go home, no doubt, but I did not accompany him. Whom to go with? With one who makes so much of joker's trousers slipping off his legs, but quite dead to how many things he had been denuded of at the dead of night, the previous day!

God, or whoever that being really is, is really hard of hearing or takes time to hear, but deaf he is by no means. For nineteen months people did not muster courage to talk, could not utter a word, but countless sighs got let out on their own accord without so much as wishing or willing them out of the mouths. Why is it that these sighs did not set aflame the gunpowder and explosives? Perhaps there was no gunpowder or explosives anywhere. It is said and not without basis that sighs have an effect. For full nineteen months,

the dread that had bound our minds, consciousness, our hearts, desires and aspirations, enthusiasm and our dextrous movements of our hands, the warmth of our speech, got smashed into smithereens. There was 'Askaashwani' or 'farman' on high through the radio to us that we were free, that we attained freedom for the second time.

Call it a day of salvation or celebration of freedom, whatever you will. Or you can put it this way, all and everybody had to assemble in a ground and having assembled, had to pledge that henceforth we would not let anybody toy with our freedom.

On the cross roads, I perceived that man also wearing the same shirt and pajama. He and many others of his sort were witnessing a juggler's show. As he witnessed the juggler's tricks, he also clapped his hands forcefully like children; that is he had not come of age even after these nineteen months. Seeing his plight, I smiled. Since, fear and fright had taken leave of me, I did not content myself with opening my lips by an inch and a half, I laughed a full laugh as it is natural and told him, "All your life you have been witnessing a juggler's show. What did you get in bargain?"

I do not know why he did not swallow this talk of mine and said, "What on earth should I get anything out of it? Do we ever get a goose out of a bread-cake? Well we get pleasure out of the show. See, how he has bound himself with the cord! He will not move his body or hands, only utter a chant and the cord will come loose of itself. He will set himself free and somebody else will get bound up with the cords!"

I left him there and went my way. I was late. May be the festival was commenced. May be the people had taken their pledge to guard their freedom. Then I reflected again. How is one to rely on these jugglers; they might set themselves loose and the cords might tighten round me. Granted that was not a real cord, it might

be only an illusion; but how does it matter with the people. They will only laugh a mindless laugh and I will be put to shame for nothing.

A man's, an individual's destiny is in his own hands. This has a double meaning, first, that every man can make or mar his destiny with his own hands, second, that a man's destiny is in his own hands, that is in the lines of his hand.

Both the meanings are correct or we can say after more reflection that the second meaning is more to the point. But destiny of human beings, that is that of the populace, rests in the hands of a few. This expression lends itself to only one meaning admitting of no further elaboration. That day, or the day in question I am expatiating these very men or a few among them, had in the speech to be delivered to us to thrash out what was written in our destiny. We were waiting in the ground, but they were nowhere to be seen. In all probability, they might have been in another ground making another gathering witnessing the writ of their destiny. The people assembled were eager. They got unwittingly, craning their necks forward to look if somebody came. The necks stretched and stretched to their utmost and shruck back to their shoulders. Nobody among those who had to come came. Only a man was sent after a long time, a man like us, who soon began giving homily to us.

"Why are you so much in haste? Why so impatient? You should have patience. You should wait. Do not get tired so soon. This not like a thing like baking a bread; this is a question of reaching our destination and to reach there, we have to wait for long, to walk for a long time".

To move for a long time! The pain in my legs grew more intense. My backache worsened. The truth is that I am no good at walking; walking seems to me an anguish. I might ascribe this to my age.

In my youth, I was as good a walker as a 'peeze' (a legendary bird). It is a different matter that the 'peeze' flies rather than walks. I remember even today that in my youth, I would walk miles together with my father. Not only walk, but run even, to the Devi's shrine and returned home. My father was wise, well, I cannot say whether he was wise or clever. He was essentially a pauper and helpless in his penury. He had never money enough for boarding in the bus. It was for this that as soon as he perceived that I got tired, he would tell me, "O, the Devi's temple is just behind that chinari tree". I would feel happy as the chinari tree was within my sight and, despite my being tired, I would walk swiftly and run to reach the chinari. But there, there I could come by no temple. My father, whether a pauper or a jester, or the jester of a father posing to be wise and clever, would cheat. "Oh, I did not mean this chinari, but that one". He would point out to a new chinari, a hundred or so yards thence. I would rather feel exasperated, but sensing a new challenge, quicken my pace to reach the new chinari. But there, too, the temple would not be seen. My father would again brazenly laugh and tell me, "Not behind this chinari, but that one". I would cry out weepingly and reach the new one and catching up many more after that in a bid to reach the Devi's asthapan. But that was in my youth and everything becomes one in youth, to walk while weeping and weep while walking. This is not so now. I have grown and growing got in years. I have wearied out myself waiting, exhausted myself by walking interminably. I cannot now trot from the chinari to the chinari in instalments. Why am I not told where to reach? How long have I to walk? If I have the grit, I shall wait and walk, or else stop and have a nap.

It is now past my bearing, insufferable feeling, or howsoever the feeling is expressed. I cannot now suffer any more weariness, pain in my legs or backache. Oh, I feel choked, although there is no longer any dread weighing on my chest. It is with great difficulty that I got free of the crowd.

Outside there were hundreds, may be even more of them waiting

in a queue, for a cinema ticket. In this very queue and among these very people, my eyes began to search for him. I found him soon. He was in his white, or to be more exact, in his colourless shirt and pajama waiting for a ticket in the queue. He also caught sight of me. He felt that I too, had come to see the film and was much happy. Flinging an abuse to the cinema people, he said.

"These brothers-in-law (wife's brothers) today issue only one ticket to each, or else I would have arranged one for you as well. Now enter the queue and sit down. I will leave some room for you in front of me".

The queue now seemed to me longer than it was before. Many among those who had come for the speech, had been weary of waiting, though more were to find entertainment in the picture than to find their destiny delineated in the speech. I say, we might locate some other cause to their joining the queue.

"Hey, what are you thinking? Why don't you sit"? His voice aroused me. He was saying, "It is a good picture. I am seeing it for the third time".

"For the third time"? I asked.

"It is not for nothing that I see it. By God, it is a profound picture. One does not make out who the villain is. The hero's father, or his friend's or the maternal uncle of the heroine. Now join the queue and tell me who the villain is in your opinion". He left room for me.

I thought if he could not make out who the villain was, how could I. Agreed that he understood, how would it benefit him? What harm could I do him if I did so. But, despite all this, I joined the queue in front of him sitting in the dust and filth of the road, caring little that my clothes would get soiled and my pants would be out at that knees and my coat get crumpled and wrinkled. I was very, very tired.

A Puzzle and a Few Men

Shanker Raina

There is a window by my pillow. Both latticed panes of the window are shut by nails drawn in them. It lets in no light at all. Some times I feel choked. ... I wish it were opened! I do not want to take a single breath here. If only I were able to move a pace or two! ... I would like to leave for my home ... just once .. my home, where all the windows are ajar. The whole atmosphere of this ward stinks of pain. The ventilators above the window are so laden with dust that it is dark inside even though there is dazzling sunlight without; it is as if sunlight has forgotten to reach here, very likely it does not muster courage to do so. Who after all summons it up?

The young kid of a girl, Nasima, used to bring me rice during daytime, but ever since she witnessed the writhing pain of the patient of bed No. 8, she too could not bring herself to do it .. It is ever a month now since she came over here. During this very month I forgot that there is a world outside other than the hospital. I have even lost count of days.

Oh! would that window could get opened! I would remain there at the open window till late, to see how the world outside looks, so that I could again breathe freely! I would like to see that monkey of Nasima again, but she is stricken of awe here. Even I myself am afraid of Bed No. 8. Would that his bed were not there in that corner ... ! He is always there right in front of my eyes. He himself closed the lattices of the window. Who knows why he loaths light! He has, it seems, shut the windows of his existence. He goes on moving about the puzzle-toy in his hand even during night as if it were day... Bed No 4 told me that he had been playing with the toy for the last ten months, with his eye-brows raised and a frown on his forehead. It is a plaything for children: a plastic box with meandering paths inside and a bead inside rolling in it, the box is to be moved in a manner that the bead reaches the place marked for it. For the whole day he tries at it frantically, but I never, even for once, saw in his face a gleam of success so that the ice in his eyes could thaw.

Some times I take pity on him that I would make a short shrift of these zigzags and byeways and lead the bead straight to the mark. But I restrain myself for some reason. May be it is not so easy as I take it. And then to distract my attention, I look at the stone balustrade blackened by smoke I think if Bed No.8 opens the window, the walls would get washed with sunlight. But will he do so? Impossible.

Playing the puzzle; day in and day out, the Bed No.8 himself seems to me a puzzle; tangled and twisted as a riddle. I do not

understand a word from him. He neither gets well, nor rids the hospital of his presence; he takes medicine neither. I saw him at times without number spilling medicine down the window. One day when he opened the window to spill the medicine down, I gathered up all the strength in me and told him, "Please keep the window open, it would let in some light ... see how dark it is here!"

But he retorted, "It is all the same to me, let it all be confounded! I am disillusioned. I am not to get well". So saying, he slammed the window shut and took himself to the puzzle. No. 4 has said that ever since his ailment worsened, he had been talking to everybody in this tone. It is revealed from his appearance that many times over got the better of death as if he is holding on to the thread of life tenaciously as if he were waiting for somebody. As for myself, I have never seen anybody coming to him.

All the patients are scared of Bed No.8. He is queer fish, not one of our species ... Only the day before, a hefty young man passed away right before his eyes. He simply saw it with a grimace of smile and tucked over himself to sleep. Bed No. 4 is to undergo a heart surgery and is writhing in pain, but No. 8 is quite dead to it. Bed No.4 feels as he is uproariously laughing at his plight. Everybody has nothing but contempt for him. He is simply known by his Bed No.8, and if Bed No.8 were to shift elsewhere, he would be forgotten. His sole existence is as Bed No.8.

I do not know why I am reminded to that willow that I hacked and stripped one autumn.

Would that window were opened! ... I would bask myself in the sun. It seems to me that the ice and the concrete of this ware are frozen in my bones. I crave to sit there at the open window till late as of old ... looking out there at the other side of the hospital. Tulips have blossomed out to the full in that younder park. The tulips, it seems, have stretched themselves out after a long slumber.

... Every thing seems to be bathing in sunlight. People have left their home for work, and children are going to the convent; they are gaily moving in their red and green uniforms. It first I only surmised, but later I recognised my Nsaima too was there with a group of children walking, nay dancing. I was relieved that she did not look this way, otherwise she would have been frightened of this barred window of the hospital. There passes a motor car, festooned with garlands" there might be a bride and bridegroom in the car. How is it that dreams of bachelor days rise again before my eyes!

Bed No.7 asked me aloud, what have you been seeing for so long? Is there a street broil going on? I told him, "No". "There has an accident taken place there?" he asked pitiously, looking at his broken leg, which an accident had rendered disabled. "No, God firbid!" "Then, what are you staring at?" he asked me. "Lock, how warm and bright the sunlight is!"

As I turned back, he had already turned over and alept. Bed No.4 was fumbling for something in the tin cuboard. I perceived rightly that today also his milk has been licked empty by the cat, and he was so worked up for this. If he could, he would have ripped the cat by his nails. Above, there in the ventilator stood the cat feigning sleep and looking innocent. "As if we had not enough trouble already that it was set after us", he said to Bed No.8. I myself abhorre the cat, it is a different matter I play with it times, but not this farcical way. Bed No.8 has spoiled it within these fifteen days it has been in the ward. There has not been a single day when he has not kicked one row or another. The troublemaker!

I remember it full well, it was snowing ceaselessly. Bed No. 8 had been struck down by pain. He had quarreled with the nurse for not taking medicine and had run away ... All of us here had felt for him that he might die of cold in the open. Tears had even gushed up in No.4's eyes and I had stealthily got up and opened his closed

window. But he returned before it was evening and was carrying the benumbed cat in his arms. And the cat has been the root of trouble since then. I was feeling much pain then and was lying supine. All the night the cat did not let me have a wink as it kept wailing and Bed. No.8 lulled and rocked it in his lap. He had that day even forgotten to shut the window and No.4 had come to tell me, "Do you see the kind he takes a liking for. It is as if his life is in the cat". I had stood dumb. On the third day, the cat stood alive and Bed No.8 got a few jingling bells and tied them round its neck. Holding it close to his bosom, he said to me, "See how maidenly coy and shy she is! She is shy before me". I said nothing to him, and turned my face.

One day while playing with the puzzle, he got up with a start and came to me. The marble in the puzzle had reached the mark and the ice in his eyes had thawed. I thought how was it possible for a lone marble to reach the mark. That day he kept playing with the cat till late. It did not look like a normal cat, but it was a jackal like tall, and bulky, its grey skin was mottled with blond patches, as if iodine had been sprinkled at these patches. No.4 disliked its turning and rolling there.

His chest was to be operated upon the next day and he was restless in his bed. The whole of the ward was gloomily serious and silence ruled there. Everyone there was wary even of taking his breath, but the cat was vivacious and spritely, now stretching itself clung to his bed and then rolled itself like a cotton ball, it seemed laughing. No.4 said to No.8 defiantly, "Why are you disturbing our peace? Are you not alive to the situation here?"

Bed No.8 said, saractically smiling, "What bad turn have I done to you that you get nettled thus? The cat kept frisking about, and No.4 bit his lips. In the evening, No.4 got up like a mad man as if he was on the prowl, caught the cat by its tail, whapped it on the breast and swung it round to fling it at No.8's face. "This will teach

him a lesson"! The cat did not mew even, snuggled close to No.8, but its eyes bulged as if it did not expect if of him. No. 8 also could not utter a word, he looked benumbed and began to caress the cat.

Everybody in the ward was frightened of death. It was midnight and I felt a pull at my wrapping and I got awakened. Seeing the cat by my pillow, I got a start; its eyes glowed like sparks. I apprehended a bite from it. The pitch dark night outside looked a black monster through the lattices. No.8 was gasping for breath. It was in the morning that he regained his breath. I continued gazing at him. The first thing he did was to search for the cat, which sat curled up as if on the prowl for him. No.8 took it in his lap and began to feel for its wounds.

I thought that but for the cat, he might have perished. From that day on, No.8 got all the more emaciated. He appeared awestruck. If anybody in the ward died, he would not put it with even for a moment; he would by himself roll it up in a sheet of cloth and carry it outside the ward on a trolley. Having done all this he would return to his bed and begin fondling the cat so affectionately as if he would never see it again.

Today also the window there by the pillow is closed as it always was.

I was told that it had rained outside and a rainbow had arched the horizon. Down below in the market, there is a bally hoo, somebody somewhere is selling fried beans, calling it "partridge meat". But I cannot see anything ... Would that the window were not closed so that I could take a breath of rain-washed air! One breath only! I feel tempted that all of us here together should break the window open, but no one among us is so strong; everyone here is enfeebled and pallid.

One day, as the cat came in, No.8 told me with much concern

that it was time for her to deliver. I got surprised. "Who?" I asked him. "Don't you notice"? he pointed to the cat. "See, what a change and difference in her mien! What an affectionate look she wears in her eyes!"

The tummy of the cat was, no doubt, grown big. I was surprised at not having noticed it till that day. No. 8 looked completely engrossed in it, and he well nigh doted on her, but I was preoccupied with No.4 whose life was becoming unbearable to him due to pain.

That day there was a turmoil again in the ward. I got awakened. I started up as I felt a movement under my pillow. It was No.8 fumbling for something under my pillow and the cat was wailing at the ventilator. No.8 spoke out laughing, "Oh, it is nothing, it is only that the cat has given her delivery, and one of the kittens fell down. Look, how warm it is!"

I do not know why that dry willow again rose in my mind, but I felt that fresh buds had sprouted on it and they appeared as ear-bobs hanging. No.8 went up to the ventilator with a pail of milk and began to fumble there. "It has kitted three young ones ... it augurs well". He said. The cat was wailing loudly and the whole ward was aroused from sleep. Everybody got a fright, and looking round, counted the patients. Then as they understood that the clamour was raised by the cat, they abhorred No.8 all the more who had brought the nuisance over here.

Nobody had even a wink the whole night; the cat kept wailing its moans now and then and No.4 got up again and again, "Now see, as if we had not suffered enough! The wailing of the cat is of evil portent. God alone knows what is to come yet!" he said.

As soon as No.8 left, all the patients, forgetting their pain, began to murmur as to how to get rid of the cat. No.4 despite his pain,

climbed up to the ventilator, but soon came down empty handed. "I cannot bring myself to do it. How they stir about and slip out of fingers!" He said as he was trembling all over. Everyone laughed at him. He, bracing himself up again, climbed and brought down all the three kittens and showed them down the window with his eyes shut.

No. 7 muttered to himself, "Good ridance, may be!"

The cat returned before it was evening. Finding the ventilator empty, she espied on all sides. She got frantically anxious and wailed out piercingly. She went to every bed, pulled the bed-covers, sniffed the dust bin and scretched the wall with her paws.

No.8, biting his lips, went out in the chill and began a thorough search in the garden, but was back empty handed, tired and worn out. All the night the cat kept wailing. I felt as if the lagubrious wails of the cat and the pain in our bodies mingled to poison the whole atmosphere.

Would that the window were not closed! No.8 had closed the window and was restively moving his puzzle. Exhausted and worn out as he was, he tucked himself up under the blanket.

In the small hours, No.4 went to No.8 with much trepidation, but he looked sullenly in a huff. He began to rouse him up. Then he lifted the wrapping from his face, the puzzle fell down and was broken to pieces. The marble could not be seen where it rolled away. No.4. gave him a shake, but there was no response from No.8.

There at the far end of the ward, the cat dolefully wailed till late. Everyone there wept silently, but I thought if he had any heir or successor.

The Savage

H.K. Bharti

Sunlight passed through the window and warily crept over the wall. The wall was uneven; it was riven all over with fissures; marked by pits and bulges. It was my impression that the glossy smooth and neat sunlight will get sullied, get bruised and turn back dejected. Devil knows why I got pleased at its getting bedraggled and bruised and at its likelihood of retreating dejected.

She stripped herself of all of her clothes and snuggled to my side.

"How did you pass these twenty years?"

"They passed of themselves". I replied

"Are you annoyed"?

"What for should I be"?

"I was not late", she said ingratiatingly.

"That you came, is enough".

The sunlight had not tired itself out; it was toddling upwards, partly getting stuck in the cracks and in part getting scattered itself in pits and depressions. I was like getting pleased at watching its antics. Soon it would get sullied and I was waiting for this.

She took my hand and laid it on her bare breast, but soon she let it off with a start.

"Why so?" I asked her.

"Your hand is like a lump of ice".

"What, did you expect otherwise?" I asked her again.

"I thought these twenty years might have warmed you up".

"Now you stand corrected that your guess was wrong".

Saying this, I was getting pleased as I got on watching the antics of the sunlight.

The sunlight had now plodded to the corner above the thick portion of the wall from the base beam. There was a big cobweb in the corner and I thought it would presently get entrapped in it.

"Do you know"? She asked.

"What?" I asked her.

"That I am not the being that I was then".

"That may be so, but what difference does it make?"

She remained silent in reply; perhaps she was reflecting whether it did after all make any difference.

The sun was now in close proximity of the cobweb. The cobweb was big tough. I was quite convinced that it would get entrapped there so firmly that there would be no turning back.

"What are you thinking?" I asked her.

"That you are no different from what you were".

"Yes".

"There might be some cause for it", she said

"Yes", I replied.

"What"? She asked.

On reaching this place, the sunlight gets stuck up.

"And then you are contented"?

"No".

"Then what"?

"I am accustomed to it".

"Self abnegaion is the biggest of all sins".

"This is what they say. Self-abnegation, on the contrary, is a *tapasaya*.

"Even if others have to pay for it"? she asked in a retort.

"What do you mean"?

"That you gloat over sunlight getting stuck up on reaching there".

"Yes, and what then"?

"Have you ever thought about sunlight also"?

"Yes and why not"?

"What"? she asked and pointed to the cobweb in the corner. The sunlight was about to swallow the bait. She caught sight of that for the first time with a swoop, like that of a hawk, swept off the cobweb with a single pull and, turning to me, as if assuming the aspect of gigantic being, held me in a tight embrace. Her warmth being mightier than my iciness; I began to thaw by and by and she paved the way for the sunlight with a melted being. Gradually, all the fissures got filled up and all the pits plaived out and the sunlight flexed itself on the smooth soft glossy surface unobstructed.

"You are good ... very good". She seemed to say in between her breaths.

Chakra Vyuha*

H.K. Bharti

Mohammad bin Ali bin Ishaq's racket lies under my own native racket; both being fixed tight in a frame, hung from a nail. The smoke emitting from a coal stove has uniformly tainted the wall and the frame of the rackets.

Abhimanyu, having left behind the sixth gate of the chakra vyuha in the course of fighting, is at the seventh gate. All his weaponry is exhausted: his bow and arrows, sword and mace and his chariot lie wrecked behind. There lies in his hands now the wheel of the wrecked chariot which he used both as a shield and

* A Chakra Vyuha is a battle formation in the Mahabharata and is called 'Lotus Formation'. The seventh successive rings are to make a breach in and also there is a method in pulling out of them. Arjuna, who knew both the methods, had taught his son Abhimanyu only the first one. The latter was, therefore, ultimately worsted as he could not extricate himself.

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for a weapon. This moment, he has lifted the chariot wheel up above his head with the strength of his arm muscles and is poised in readiness either to defend himself from an attack on the Korawa's side or to attack the soldier bearing a spear in front.

This moment lies petrified and stock-still; that is why neither the soldier flings the spear nor does Abhimanyu hurl the enormous and heavy mace at the root of his skull to kill him.

This petrified moment stands in between the act and the result. This reality is confined to the wall of my room, just as Mohammad bin Ali bin Ishaq's framed racket hung on the wall, is confined to my feeling. Otherwise Mohammad bin Ali bin Ishaq left for Nigeria long back after he graduated in Indian Architecture. At that moment, he was perhaps at the first gate of the chakra vyuha or perhaps having crashed in the first, making a desperate effort at the second one. How then, as he saw me for the second time accompanied by a Mauritanian girl at the University gate, he was engaged in heroics at some other gate of the chakra vyuha.

"It is my intention to marry her".

"It will be so fine".

"I like her very much".

"That is obvious".

"She has a devastating figure".

"That might be so".

"You have not seen her with her clothes stripped off".

This brought me to laugh.

"I did not tell you in that sense. You are mean".

"I might well be!" I burst out laughing.

"What other sense did you say it in?"

"Come, all the three of us shall drink like a fish. Luco is a fish and I like this habit of hers".

"This moment did not get petrified, and he would have wished it to be so neither because it would have stiffened cold like a corpse.

Abhimanyu is again seized of the feeling that his wife is in a family way and the matter will not end there. What will come in its wake? He himself does not know. His reality is the chakra vuha where he desperately struggles for a way out.

"Once in Nigeria, I will start building by effecting a blend of the local and Indian architecture. I will begin at my home".

"It is a good idea".

"My blue-print is ready : a flat roof, thick walls and concrete sun-breakers. They do not get hot like those made from aluminium".

The enormous and heavy chariot wheels still in Abhimanyu's hand; his mighty upper arms have not suffered the least bend.

The Korawa soldier is still poised for throwing the spear. This is merely the reality of the moment got petrified on the wall, otherwise this tale had ended long back.

Daryodhana's son has long back struck at Abhimanyu's skull with his mace after the latter gets a fall and thus ended one day of

Mahabhart. Arjuna has long back done with Jayadatha.

Beneath the rackets hung on the wall, the green paint is still untarnished, all the smoke has been taken by the rackets. Mohammad bin Ali bin Ishaq played tennis superbly well. His agility assorted well with his glossy ebonite body. It was perhaps due to this that he made the dent in so many a door of the chakra vyuha in such a manner that he did not get aware of the fact till the last gate. It was because of this that he did not feel heady wine of his exploits, nor was he perturbed about extricating himself which bedevils many a human being.

On Abhimanyu's countenance perturbation is evedent because he has reached the last gate and does not know how to pull himself out. The chariot wheel will not shield him long; and Arjuna has drifted far away on the other side in the course of fighting.

How painful the auguished look and perturbation on Abhimanyu's face is! This frozen moment should thaw ... it should warm up with the warmth of life.

This day of Mahabhart should end completed on my wall. I cannot bring myself to see on put up with this anguish and perturbation on MOhammad bin Ali bin Ishaq's face. But the fact has not altered with my not seeing it. I have not seen Abhimanyu also dying, but the fact is unaltered; he long long back gave up his ghost on the last gate of his chakra vyuha.

Mohammad bin Ali bin Ishaq had his blue-print still in his briefcase when the war broke out in Nigeria. The flat roof and concrete sun-breakers ... this dream was yet to come true when the mercenary white soldiers of Baifare had besieged Mohammad bin Ali bin Ishaq and his party.

He had reached the last gate of the chakra vyuha when another

day of Mahabhartar got completed.

I am trying my utmost not to think over the anguish and perturbation that clouded his face then.

Abhimanyu is still holding chariot wheel in his mighty young hands ready to attack and the rackets fixed in the frame are hung from the nail on the otherside, taking the smoke on themselves leaving the green paint beneath unsullied.

The petrified moment on the room-wall is perhaps the last gate of the chakra vyuha.

Perhaps it is my turn now.

The Sunless Tomorrow

Hraday Koul Bharti

It might have been about two in the afternoon, the postman knocked at the door. The very manner of his knocking made me feel hamstrung. I perceived that the postman brought no good tidings. I knew the post man for years, ever since I grew up, so well that from the mere manner of his knock, I could tell what the contents of the letter can be. I knew even this much that he will not budge from the door till I receive the letter. Knowing that there is no avoiding him, I got up with my legs atremble to open the door. The sun light outside had a pallid hue like that of a corpse, as if a cobra had given it a bite. I felt perturbedly concerned: "God

forbid, if it were so, then?"

The postman stood there knocking that peculiar manner without a break. I reached with my legs cowering beneath me, from the corridor to the compound and then to the gate, feeling that it took me ages to cover the distance. The courier handed over the envelope to me as I opened the door. Then he turned back, mounted his bike, and wheeled away. He did not even so much as wish me. But in that brief moment, I noticed that his skin had turned like felt, and it had got profusely wrinkled and on the ridges of the wrinkles there was a dense hairy growth like the fur of a monkey. I forthwith opened the envelop ... It was a telegram intimating:

"This is my last day. I will not rise from tomorrow. I kow what your plight will be after me, but I cannot help it". Yours, THE SUN.

"So, the Sun is not to rise tomorrow ... Is it for this that it has a cadaverous hue? My anxious concern has come true that the King Cobra has stung it". I thought. Then I folded the telegram, and for the first time caught sight of its backside. The courier had written in his own hand with a violet pencil: "You might be thinking how come that I did not even wish you today. To tell you the truth, ever since my skin hardened and got hirsute like that of a monkey, I have lost the power of speech; instead of speech, a monkey-chatter emits from my throat. Who can have the patience to draw meaning out of my chatter? That is why I have stopped talking .. rather chattering".

It took me an effort to put the folded telegram in my pocket. My knees seemed unhinged, a haze covered my eyes. I tried to take a pace, but could not do so. I was about to flop down when two men were there to keep me standing, entering as they did from under my arm-pits. The hardness of their bones made itself felt even inside the clothes ... skeletons put in, filled in the suits. I could only sense this because the mist before my eyes had got

denser and my last feeling was that the earth had been stung by the King Cobra. Thereafter, I got unconscious.

When I came to myself again. I found that I had been laid supine on an operation table. Around the table, there were four men looking at me with their heads lowered. They wore white aprons and their eyes alone were visible. Overhead from the ceiling, hung five six blazing electric bulbs, emitting more heat than light. I could see no one's face clearly, partly because their faces were covered with bands, and in part because the light fell on their scalps and not on their faces. All the four were completely bald, not a single strand of hair stood on their heads. One among them lifted his hand gently and laid it on my forehead. The hand was cold, cold as an icicle. Laying his palm on my forehead, he made as if he stretched his claws and brought them down as a scorpion does when it brings down its pincers to sting. He pressed my forehead with his hand and kept it there for quite a while. He perhaps liked the warmth of my forehead, or perhaps he wanted to suck it out. I knew that if he took away all the warmth he needed from my forehead, I would not be wanting in it, I would not be exhausted of all the warmth; but the hard bony fingers of his hand felt against my forehead and the grating sound that was produced as he moved his hands about, pained me much more. Closing my eyes, I frowned my face and he slowly lifted his hand away from my forehead.

Both of my eyes were closed, fearing that if I opened them, he might again lay his skeletal hands on my forehead. In the midst of this, there came a sound of walking, and I opened my eyes with a start. All the four men were there, taking some consultation at some distance from the operation table. My eyes for the first time fell on the wall of the room behind them. It was a queer wall, all made of paper, glued at the edges with a paste. The paper was written over everywhere; some of the contents had faded and others were still clear and distinct. It seemed that the wall had been erected by joining countless sheets of paper; some of the pages

were upright, and others upside down, still other askew and awry. The wall too, had turned pallid and blotched blue at innumerable places. There was a crack all across the wall, and there was a hole, too. I made an effort to read the contents of the writings on the wall, but could not do it because I had lost my spectacles somewhere before I had got unconscious. I narrowed my eyes and, after a pause, tried to decipher the writing. The plight of mine was perceived by them also and they came by my operation table.

"You do seem now alright"? one of them asked me.

"Yes", I nodded my head.

"What were you trying to see there on the wall with your eyes narrowed down?" he asked.

"Nothing", I told him with a shake of my head. He moistened his lips and looked at me in a manner that I for the first time became aware that below his forehead in the deep pits of limestone, there were eye balls also.

"Is it that you were trying to go through the contents of the writing"? he asked pointing to the wall with blue blotches.

"Yes", I conveyed with a nod.

"Can't you read it"?

"No", I shook my head again for I could summon courage to talk. The conviction had grown in my mind that if I tried to speak, I would give forth a monkey chatter instead of words.

He looked towards the wall again and pointing to it with his skeletal hands, spoke out,.... "These are the pages of a history from the beginning of time..." He brought his hands towards me

and tapped my forehead twice, no thrice with the tapering tips of his bony fingers, and proceeded forth saying, "...the sunlight passed even through concrete walls, that is why we had to raise there a paper wall. Some glue had stuck there by mistake. Then some bird pecked at it and bored a hole in it. The event is enchained there in words, albeit the date and the year got torn with the pack".

I got so impatient as to tell him that the event is orphaned there, but I was apprehensive that I would emit monkey-screams for words. He suddenly felt silent and the second one began.

"The crack there in the wall is due to our own mistake. The events were flimsy, we should have taken a thought beforehand that they would not bear the sunlight. We should by no means have used them".

He had barely completed the sentence, when both of them came near my operation table and then so bowed towards me that their heads joined. Meanwhile, the light in the ceiling bulbs diminished, but their heat increased.

"You scream aloud, then only you shall be able to die. Give out a shriek". One of them spoke to me.

The electric bulbs emitted only a thousand candle light, but their heat had augmented. I was drenched in sweat all over, but yet I did not cry. I was sure that I would scream like a monkey rather than cry.

"Give out a scream! Scream out!"

"Do give a shriek, only you shall be able to die".

"Give out a shriek!"

All the four raised a furore, and I screamed out of fear, crying

out .. aaa,aaa,aaa.

My scream continues still, continues even today. I do not loose my breath and the scream does not come to an end. Now the cry turns by and by into a monkey chatter and my skin gradually turns into felt. The felt wrinkles out and on the ridges of the wrinkles bristles a hairy growth. The paper wall is now riddled with countless blue blotches...it is all blue through and through. Outside perhaps that tomorrow has come, the tomorrow that will see no sun.

I still scream out...I continue screaming even today.

The Crown of Creation

Hraday Koul Bharti

"What is this?" she said

"A spider's web". I told her.

"It is so fine", turning on her side, she moved towards me.

"I had brought it for you", I told her and she felt pleased.

"What is that"? She pointed to the shelf over the window.

"Cactus", I replied.

"What is that"? she asked again .

"Naagphani", I replied in an explanation, but the truth is that she did not take it in.

"What do you need it for"? she put another question.

"Its thorns are fashioned into a crown".

"What are the crowns of thorns used for"? she put her plump and smooth arms around my neck.

"That has its customers", I told her cutting the matter short.

"To what use do we put its leaves"?

"Don't you know"? I asked her back.

"No", she shook her head.

"Scorpions are fond of its leaves", I made her understand.

"Well, how does it interest you"? she asked me again.

"Their poison is very costly". I told her.

"Do you sell that too"?

"Yes", I replied briefly.

"Who will be its buyers"? she asked in surprise.

"Every one!"

"For what purpose"? she asked again.

"Some buy it for taking themselves, still others buy it to make others take it", I replied.

She remained silent for a moment after this and I sported with her organs with my fingers. She remained motionless for a while.

Then her eyes fell on that wall where a lizard stood as if in a meditation on the prowl for a fly.

“What is there on that wall”? she pointed to the lizard on the wall.

“A chipkali”, a lizard, I told her laughingly.

“A lizard!” she said with a start.

“Why are you surprised”?

“Do not you know? It is reminded after two and a half ghari (a measure of time)”.

“Well, what then”? I asked her.

“Then what after when two and a half ghari pass, it will be reminded of...”

“Of what?” I cut her in the midst of her reply.

“That it will have to give you a sting”, she said opening her eyes wide.

“I will also give it a sting”, I told her moistening my lips.

“Why do not you give it then”?

“Because I too will be reminded of it after two and a half gharis”.

“What? What will you be reminded of”? she asked.

“Of my own nature”.

“What would you do then”?

“Sting it, to be sure”, I told her laughing.

“But it is possessed of venom”, she made me aware.

“I, too, have that”.

“Then give it a sting”, she suggested.

"Not yet", I told her.

"When will you do it then"? she asked again.

"After two and a half gharis are over when I am reminded of my nature. The only problem remains whether its two and a half gharis or those of mine are over first".

"What does that mean"? This did not enter her head.

"That, my dear, means that if its two and a half gharis are shorter than that of mine, it will be reminded of that first and then accordingly bite me".

"Then?" she asked with some perturbation.

"Do not you worry", I consoled her.

"What will you do"? she asked.

"It will take to a swindle, I will move the hands of my watch back".

"It, too, can resort to a swindle!"

"No"! I said with a measure of confidence.

"Why not"?

"Because it is not the 'Crown of Creation'; while I am. She felt pleased on hearing my reply. She was contented. She folded the spider's web and held it close to her bosom with affection. I stretched my arm and switched off the bulb. Everything smoothed out in the darkness.

What Should I Talk Of

R.L. Shant

What should I talk of?

It was my grandmother who knew what to talk of. You could draw a hundred and one meanings out of a single thing she said, giving rise to as many inferences, but to her it bore one single meaning. I do not know why I had neither faith nor belief and, what my fickle mind was fumbling and searching for. Her meaning however was clear and unambiguous : to hold fast to *dharma* and to absolve yourself of the sins in this short life to put to good use

the fleeting moments of your life and to pave way for charming other world, to accept gratefully what God bestows and to own plain simplicity and rectitude of this world.

Two types of characters only figured in her talks : the ones who stood by dharma and those against it. The paths of those on whose side God and the dharma stood were illumined even in the darkness of this world. Her ingenuous and simple world had distinctly clear bounds : some fears and restrictions.

The sustaining aliments were not available in large measures as compared to our times. To value it and to use it frugally was, therefore, also a limit and restriction. In case you scattered some salt about, she would bring home to you with images that you would be made to lift a mountain for every speck of salt you cast down, there in Nagra, the Nagra that stood beyond the bounds of this *janama*. It is true that all her talks and characters were held in leash by the fear of hell. Its fearsome shadow was on the prowl for every breath and hovering above to swoop upon.

Our old generation nurses us a grudge that we entertain no fears and keep to no limits and restrictions, neither those from God, nor from man, none relating to aliments, dharma and creed.

Very likely the old characters would be dumbed and exhausted long before they developed in the world to which we have been condemned. They do not perceive this, or even when they perceive it, do not acknowledge that. It is not that we reply to them, but there is luck in their favour. Today's character has no grit to stick to it, he gets a tongue-tie before he speaks. His self-esteem knows no restraint, he is unmindful of what others think. He, instead of hiding his flaws and foibles, exposes them to the full gaze of others, laughing under the sleeves, lifting countless slabs on their eyelashes. What restrictions shall he accept? What shall be his values? What is his life? Was it given to him on his asking?... May

be he would not have liked to be born.

His breaths? He has been giving an account of them ever since he began to take them, and this debt is ever increasing day by day. Sustaining aliment? A siren call from across the sandy desert is only leading him astray.

His society? Its Monaliza-smile was ever an enigma to him. All along his life, he has been trying to fit himself to its measure, now falling short and then brimming over its confines.

His Narga is to lose his way; he sticks to it only to keep up with his neighbours. He lives only to die shattered to pieces after a brief period. These brief fleeting moment are to be given a meaning if at all they can lend themselves to that.

The First Lesson

R.L. Shant

No sooner did he set his foot in the village than he cast his look at his wrist watch. He slackened his pace to scratch his shoulder blades; his back was totally drenched in sweat. He dusted his pants and boots on which a thick coat of dust had dried in a paste. He had been walking, nobody knew how long. Tired out he cast his eyes far into the distance making out with some effort a road down and then far away, looking like a worn out out cast away skin of a serpent, and enveloped in a blue smoky fog of the morning. It was long before he reached the end of the road.

While plodding on to make his way on the borders of hills, through the grassy hedges, across the dales and brooks and dusty forlorn farms, a resolve was being formed in his mind that he

would bring light and hope for the neglected and the forsaken region. He thought that he would at long last settle after having been made to wander so long. He kept on walking, and gradually his pace slowed down with the hope that he would be able to join the new position by noon so that that day was also included.

He started walking again. Meanwhile from afar he made out somebody progressing towards him, He came quite near and complimented him as a mark of good will. He told him that they were waiting for him as he caught hold of his hand affectionately. He walked in step with his escort's long strides, wearied and lifeless though his legs were.

Both of them entered a low roofed thatched hut. The room which they entered was enveloped in darkness as in the amavas period of the moon. About thirty or so of people, standing mute, had gathered there round the coffin. He also unhesitatingly entered the room and sat by the coffin at the only unoccupied patch left there. Nobody lifted his eyes towards him nor did they speak to him. One could even hear the sound of breathing. He also sat huddled up among the,. Gathering himself still more, his hand unwittingly touched the coffin. He broke out in a wall which gradually mounted to bitter cries, tears streaming down his eyes .. not knowing how long.

As his throat parched and his head began to reel, he stopped weeping. He rubbed his eyes, finding there was nobody in the room. He got up and came out. It was twilight outside. He looked all around, but found nobody there as if the entire village was uninhabited by man or animal. Where had they gone after all? He just waited and gave a shake to his head, which he felt altogether emptied by weeping, it was tingling like a tin-toy of a child. He left the village, and at a spot far away from the village, he saw a figure of somebody whom he thought familiar.

As he saluted him on his own like in the morning before he grasped him there. "This day has worn to close now, but by tomorrow, at any rate, my job has to be done". He asked him, "Brother, where is the school situated here? I have to join there".

"How could they start a school here, sir"? There should be children of school-going age for that purpose. About six years might have gone by since the Peer Sahib of that hill over there got incensed with the people of this village. You can see for yourself, if you can come by a child of fifteen ... twelve years of age".

As he said this, he kept on ha-ha-haing. How queer was the man he had seen in the morning, he thought. After a pause, he spoke again, "...Now it is only nothing but the greatness of Haagar Sahib that he will come after four or five years to pay a visit to the village and a school will get opened here. How good that would be if that happened! But where can we find doctor? Take this son of Haji Sahib, if he were here, this solitary child, who read, would not have died today. Think of that a bit, Master Sahib. Master Sahib!"

In the next morning as he felt one side of his neck cramped, and something like ants stirring over his legs, he came to understand that he had fallen asleep on that very dry grass, nobody knew when. He did not know how long that man had gone on talking.

A refreshing wisp of a breeze revived him. He cast his eyes towards the village, one complete group, a paathshala in sound sleep, a thatched hut, a stack, paddy saplings. He flexed and began to say facing all this: "...I will tell you today that this earth is not flat, but round like a musk-melon ... The sun is stationary at one place ... Our earth rotates round its axis and revolves round the sun. You can perform the experiment: Place a football in front of a burning oil lamp. The side in front will receive the light, while the

other side will remain dark. That is how our days and nights are formed ... Exactly like this, the change in seasons takes place ... Do you understand? Shabaash ... In the same way, your fields, your brooks, your crops that feed you, and the water that you drink ... Now, tell me what are the uses of mountains?..."

The sunlight directly fell on his eyes, and for a moment things seemed blurred to him.

Then he made out the road in the smoky fog of the morning ... Far away....down below.

Adam And Eve

Ghulam Nabi Shakir

There is nothing that I can call my own.

The darkness moved a pace or two forward; the surroundings getting chilled still more. Heaving a long sigh, I looked towards the skies, into its limitless expanses; the refreshingly cool beauty of the eyes began scattering fire.

There is nothing that I can call my own ... The wingless bords of my thought came back only to flap their wings around me.

The heat of my burning feelings parches my mouth dry at times, and sometimes I warm my chilled ice cold body with my breaths.

I am now grown angrily cold to my own self. Beyond this, my eyes cannot make out anything. This is due either to my eyesight having spent itself out or to the real picture of life being too dim for perception.

That is why I was running and thus came across many people; everyman being like me, all presenting to eyes a plight similar to one reflected on my face, my reflection in their eyes and that of theirs in mine. What can I do for them or what can my extended hand expect from them?

That very arid desert as far as your eyes go! The outcome of entire life nothing but a desert, and all this closing on me! I am moistening my parched lips with every drop of my blood: I am thirsty from the beginning of time.

I am all alone. There is nothing that I can call my own. The darkness moved two steps forward, and the surroundings are chilled further.

An age went by since I saw her. There opened a dent in the flintlike breast of the night and the howling wind came in, and something like a shadow like flickered in the room.

I saw myself in her eyes. The pulse beats thousand of thoughts stopped and the environs throbbing with life fell lifelessly inert like a paralytic on its side.

“Come here, I will take you along”.

I held her silken pliant hands in my own as her words peirced my bosom.

“Come here, I will take you along” she repeated.

"Where"? I did ask her a question.

It was the morning of a queer day, when she by no means knew what an evening was like, nor did I come to think of it on my part.

All our senses but one had fallen dead in the warm cosy bed. "I belong to you and you are mine", a long chain of dreams and wine of the kohled eyes.

The cool refreshing soothing affection amidst a hot summer of marble-white body, and the fetters of the enchantment of black hair.

All this belongs to you, all this belongs to me.

The darkness of night, the silent and tranquil moments, the scintillating stars, all these were witness to our mutual pledge.

We were passing our days like premordial human beings. The blind and lame of the society! Both of us laughed an uproarious laugh at the blind and the decrepit.

The dark and refreshing cool night was a magic-castle for both of us where it was impossible for anybody to tread.

One day as she set her nude being to be taken on the table, the familiar fragrance of her body left its piquancy in my blood. While my eyes blazed fire and my breathing quickened with the unwanted rapidity, our silent witnesses were watching us stealthily.

The winds brought the tidings, a frightful scream made itself audible from the dark heart of the night, the silent and tranquil moments raised muffled but fear-stricken hue and cry. Sniffing my whereabouts, my senses nosed a queer bad odour, as if a son of mankind had set his foot in a fairyland.

We cast our eyes on each other, I saw her nude existence. Something like some sense of outraged honour in a long passed historical character emerged in us; apprehending their pallid and shrivelled up faces, my blood boiled.

I pulled out from out of my bosom a hidden rusted sword and said to her, "Don't you worry". But again her naked existence came into my mind.

She, too, in all probability, was pointing to this. I hid her by wrapping the blanket of my own being around her, and heaved a sigh of relief.

The surroundings were now all the more surcharged, all our guards were perturbed but eager to watch the pass we had come to.

From far off came the sound of a staff set for walking. The sound gradually neared and a weak man with a stoop stood close by us in the dark.

"What on earth are you doing this"? supporting his hand firmly on the ground, he said to me.

I cast a look on him from head to foot ... a black line of a shadow was there putting me the question.

"I am doing what Adam did to Eve".

"You are aware of what came of that"? he said, raising his staff in the air.

"I know that God's wrath descended on Adam"

"Do you then want that to happen again"?

“That will never happen again”. I said.

“If the world is peopled by men like you, that will surely come to pass”.

“But what do you think of this woman”?

I lifted the blanket of my being slightly aside, and there flew away the Eve beside me with a flutter in the shape of a sparrow, and I wrapped my lonely existence back. The black line burst out laughing at me.

The darkness of night, the icy chilling night.

There is nothing I can all my own. I am all alone. From far away I look deep into the pitch dark of the night, straining my eyes for something.

The burning heat of my feelings sometimes parches dry even the moisture of my mouth, and at times I warm my chilled ice cold body with my breaths.

He

Gulshan Majeed

Like the tall apparition of a will-o'-the-wisp, the hornet's nest...his eyes sunken deep like the mouth of an oven, he made his appearance. a frightened shriek escaped me.

We were playing hide and seek. Our cow-shed being the appointed spot where I awaited to be called, with my eyes shut over tight with my hands. I did not like playing with others and was for this called a raged mother's child. The fairies, the small golden sparrows, and parrots of her tales alone caught my fancy. But when sometimes she got transported to seek into unknown dreams and fairy-lands with the rhythm of her spinning wheel and a flood of tears rolled fown her eyes, I too took to crying. She

would then drive me out with numberless kisses and caresses. "Go and play deary, yes, you the apple of my eyes. Cheer up, and go!" This was, in fact, what I wanted, and I would go out to seek my play-mates.

"What is there in your eyes"? "A golden egg". "A mole shall prick your eyes if you try to see this way". We played.

"Come, O come", and there appeared before me the wraith of the will-o'-the-wisp. A shriek left my mouth, "O my mother....!"

The next morning, everybody taunted me at the river bank. I heard all about the incident amidst the bursts of laughters. "Where is he now"? "He is staying at Swani Chacha's". How pitilessly he had beaten him yester evening, and then feeling repentent, he took him his home. I too felt for him. Not for nothing am I a raged mother's child. Had I not been so cowardly, that poor beggar might not have got so much hidings. He used to say that he hailed from a far off village in those distant woods, that was quite as big village as our village was, and that once, no one knows why, he felt lost and alone there.

It was Sunday. All of us rushed to Swani Chacha's where a number of people, young as well as old, had thronged around him. I could not make out a single word of what he said. It was only when the village elders burst out laughing at something, I too, taking a queue from my playmates and joined their laughter. Sometimes my laughter came of itself. That smallish head, as big as that of bird, a woolen cap reaching as far down as his ears, deep sunken eyes, moustaches shaven off, black beard, a face like a dark winter night.

In the evening, I probingly enquired of my mother about him. She said to me, "He says that he has come from a far off village to seek some antique articles, but uptil now, he has come by no such

thing and that is why he is tirelessly wandering”.

I took pity on him. “Would that he comes by those articles in this village of ours. It might well be, he is Taj-ul Malook who had taken upon himself to rid his father of his blindness! He is than a prince. Who knows who he is?” I remained thinking. Soon a doubt assailed me that he might be seeking old lamps for th new ones...he might be a wizard. I got much provoked. After two days, he came to seek permission to live in our old cow shed. Summoning up my courage, I asked him warily, “Are you seeking old lamps for the new ones”? He looked at me and burst out laughing. I looked towards my mother, who was laughing. “Stop talking you fool”! Go and take your calligraphy exercise. “I caught hold of her pheran, a child after all, who takes for truth whatever he is told at his age”. She said. So it means that my mother tells me mendacious tales, I felt small like a cole plant. I started wistfully at her face. Hoonh! Can my mother tell me a lie! How does she know that man from the jungle? My mother forsooth has heard the wails of Hiymaal at Hiymaal’s spring many times over. Is this too a lie? I felt myself far more old than he.

He did not work at all, save roaming about all day, staff in hand, ridge after ridge, house after house. He had no worries at all of providing himself with meals. The horse too he came mounted on and loaded with a raggy bundle of his clothes etcetra, was wild and ravaged othrs’ things. But that horse was devoured by a lion in the hut. This affected him least. “The horse was there and was devoured by the lion, I shall hail it if it can devour anymore”, he said. His sweet simple talks, full of love enabled us pass the days swiftly. He was liked by everybody. While talking, his limpid and shapely eyes sought something in everything and everybody. “What is that something”? Everybody took stock of himself and his whereabouts and then looked at him. Seeing his plight, everybody got perturbedly inquisitive. “What trouble overtakes him? He would feel less burdened where he to reveal it to us”.

They thought. But he kept his trouble to himself. They respected him and asked for his opinion in everything, taking their own counsel in the long run though.

In the beginning, he found himself thronged about and fussed upon, but meanwhile other engagements became more urgent, and this left him forlornly alone; having nothing to do himself. The farmers returned home late in the evening, weary and tired and felt asleep. Gradually the elders where replaced by us, the children. Then as soon as we went out to play, he would call us to listen to his fascinating tales. At times we would rush away to mend the dikes, and he would smoke the while. As time passed, it took us more time in mending the dikes and would play there at throwing water at one another, stealing others traps, and had many other playful skirmishes, mimicking him, playing out what he said and did. As we were always late, he too accompanied us one day. That day all felt pleased. We taught him how to mend dikes and set basket traps to catch fish. He said that in his native village there were no such streams as could be plodded through; the waters there came splashing down the rocks and was ice-cold to touch.

People now paid little heed to what he said, pretending not to have heard him, even when he called them, their hands being so full all the day long. They could find no time to listen to his tales, hard pressed as they were. "How he simply eats without working for it! Has no worry at all. Then it is no use expeting any sense of these hilly-billies, absolutely none. He perhaps takes himself for a saint", They said. Unmindful of all the references, he would mend dikes for us, he would prepare the basket traps splendidly well. The children were no doubt pleased with him. He, too, on his part, got thick with us.

Then the work reached a stage when it was to be done at home, and got confined to indoors. Then once again the willow copses

came alive with festivities. Distance between him and us widened. In the beginning, though, he looked askance at our fairs and customs, but gradually these grew agreeable to him. He turned his flyswatter into a lute, and would dance around in our midst. He remembered numberless songs which men would wonder at, which made men oblivious of their heart and home; a strange love and affection sprang within ourselves to listen to them.

That winter it snowed ceaselessly, so much so that people had to clear it off their roofs thrice. He was adept at shovelling it down the roofs. He lent his helping hand to everybody, but in the long run fell victim to it. Then as spring came with its urgent demands for working at the farms, he had taken to crutches and would not be able to take a step without a support. His eyes had sunk deeper. They would bring him tea and meals there in the beginning, but then he would of himself announce his presence with a knock at meal times. They had almost forgotten him now, or that might as well mean they had come to regard him as of their ilk, or like one roofless vegetable plant of their village.

The approaching examinations were getting on our nerves, and we had no time for him. There remained only my mother who fed him well. He, on his part, would also admit to it that he was there solely for that sister of his or else he would have left the place. His movement was now confined from the cow-shed to our house and back to the cow-shed. The village people forgot him, and he, too, washed them off from his memory.

That year there was an untimely and ceaseless snowfall in spring, as if winter had a new beginning. Everyone took himself to indoors. And one morning early he came at our door, calling my mother. Both of us, mother and son, came out. It was snowing hard, and he had drawn his woollen cap far down his ears ready for his departure.

“Well, sister, allow me, I am leaving”. There was a gleam in his eyes, and he had given up his crutches.

A Child In The Rain

Shafi Shauq

“How come, you footing these old paths?”

With a start he looked to his right and saw a smallish man with a huge stuffed sac tied to his back with cords. He raised his photocrome goggles up to his forehead and stared at the man. A tramp with grizzled untidy short beard, sparce hair, clad in a besoild short shirt and pajamas, was there taking a short rest on a big stone which lay to a side - showing his snuff-covered dirty teeth.

“O you! How are you? In fact I missed to see you.” Responding

his smile with an intimate concern, he wanted to show as if he had yearned for years to see him. The potter stretched forth his right arm, and he, in spite of his reluctance, took his hand and warmly pressed it with his both hands.

"Do you make out who I am? - But how could you, sir? I am seeing you after a long long time - I think more than fifteen years. Now you are a big man of the town. How could you remember everyone? And, I? I got stuck to this village and grew old. One clearly forgets one's past in the city. You are not to blame". He said all this in quick succession without giving him time to understand whether he taunted him or tried to allay his embarrassment.

"Oh no. I remember everything, - everything I remember. How can one forget the friends of one's youth?"

"Then tell me my name. Yes, come out!"

He blushed but still ventured to say, "We were once class fellow? How good were the days! I remember everything."

"Yes, that is obvious. But you do not tell me my name. And I know you cannot. I am - Ahmad Pala. Remember?"

"Oh yes, yes. I remember. Now I can remember everything. Gone are those days." Taking out the pack of cigarettes from his pocket, he offered him one, tucking another in his lips, and affecting pleasure, lit a match stick, and took it first near the stranger's mouth and then to his own. Leaning against a willow, he shared with him a few funny remembrances. The yokel took initiative to end this happy encounter by asking his estranged friend, "But tell me, how is it that you tread this unkempt path? But yes, I can guess, you intend to visit your new orchard, yes. Isn't it? One gets rekindled there. Your Kaka Lala tends it well all the time."

"Yes. And more so because I wished to pace these old old avenues for the fun of it. I really longed to do so. I came from the town only yesterday."

"How are your kids and your wife?"

"Yes, they are well. They too are with me here. How could I leave them there in the city? I insisted them to have a stroll today,, but what have they to do with these old paths of mine? And then the present conditions! One has to avoid dangers. You know."

"Oh no. I don't think there is any danger to you. Those who are really in danger, are a different lot. So now I take leave of you, Sir. God wishes we shall meet again?" He left and trudged along a narrow path.

He had passed through the village. Dolled up in a well-ironed bright white kurta and pajamas, he looked rather outlandishly weird - or perhaps he himself took it so. But whosoever saw him remained gazing at him. And at a few spots, women and children craned out their heads through their windows to see him. While walking he had time and again glanced to his right and his left and to maintain his equipoise, kept his arms crossed behind him, but feeling it odd, put his left hand in the side pocket, dangling the other arm to and fro - knowing not what to do of his arms. At times he had paced staggeringly and slipped on the round stones. And somehow or the other, he had come out of the village, and felt relieved, ambling the meandering avenue, for there was nobody to gaze at him. He wished to whet his slumbering feelings by walking the old forgotten paths of his native village. He rather laboured to do so for he thought that pain or pleasure might give him a feeling of life. Not that he had decided it of his own accord to have a ramble, it was on the insistence of his elder brother - Kaka Lal. 'Have a stroll in the orchards'. He had pressingly told him. 'You shall surely recover from this cadaverous malaise of

yours. And then you shall yourself see how we keep your share of the land.' Since his wife complained of pain in his legs, and his children felt jaded in the village, he went out alone. And he, in fact,, wished to go alone.

Engrossed in the splashing ducks in the ponds and the burgeoning orchards, he kept plodding the undulating path. All the while he consciously strived to stir his benumbed feelings and memories and to some extent he succeeded in the attempt. Initially, he felt listlessly fatigued, but soon the ambience subsided all the commotion of his mind. The twenty four years of estrangement gradually got reduced into almost nothing, and he was again the same carefree youngman when he used to roam about in the same fields and orchards to while away his jobless days. With every stone, every brook and every ridge he had a fond intimacy. Each event of his prime days that had happened in the glens of willows got exhumed from the ashes of forgetfulness, some made him perspire with shame and some enlivened him with a fresh joy.

The path meanderously clambered up the hillock - the same way it did before. There was, however, one perceptible difference, instead of open terraced rice fields and stretches of unused land, there grew profuse apple orchards all around, and the path was hedged on both sides with tall poplars of an exotic breed, making it look like a long tunnel. The farmers had divided all the available land into numerous small fragments and fenced each fragment with barbed wire. They had grown bitter-cherry, plum and apricot along the demarcations to reinforce the fences.

In front of him, he could see the distant white snow-line of the Kousarnag cliffs as if it supported the deep, bright blue sky, rather a dense network of sun rays. Each step revealed more and more vistas of the mountain. And then he reached near his own orchard. He halted for a while as he descried someone carrying an insecticide - spraying machine on his shoulder coming. From him

he got his guess confirmed and bending the barbed wire at a loose place, he entered the orchard.

It was a newly grown pear-orchard. The young trees were crowned with white bloom, making a beautiful match with the golden mustard bloom heaving on the ground. Silence prevailed everywhere but the buzz of the bees. The cuckoo, perched somewhere on the top-twig of a poplar, made the whole valley - from the Kousarnag to the Harmukh, resound with its intermittant calls. Resting his feet on his, yes his own, piece of land, he was almost tranced. He desired to stretch himself out as far as possible to get dissipated into the inebriating environs. He could not decide whether to lie down or romp about. Each of the calls of the distant cuckoo made some or the other repressed desire raise its head again in his bosom. The white fluffy clouds on the mountains reminded him of something very passionate, very intimate, but what, he could not make out. Nevertheless, he soon realised that this joy was not lasting, and he was overpowered by the sense of his helpless routine life. He sighed deeply and spotted a piece of sward behind a big hay-covered ridge at the brim of a pond. For a long time, he remained watching the small colour-dispersing bubbles emerging from the tiny insects and glossy blades of grass proliferating on the sediment. He sighed again, lit a cigarette, took rapid puffs and feeling himself alien in the surroundings, he decided to leave. Having cast a farewell look at the orchard, he came out, crossed the ponds cautiously, he resumed his ascending journey along the field ridges.

He had no idea of the exact path leading to the apple orchard, he walked in the direction of the familiar distant plane growing on the crest. Climbing down a slope, he reached the bank of fast-flowing stream, the clean and icy water of which foamed splashing against the greenish boulders. The stream was not much deep and wide, but it was not quite easy to cross it. Hoping to find out a pole-bridge or a ford, he continued walking along the bank over

the round stones. To his left, there was a wall raised by loose stones and to his right, across the stream, there stood a steep crest and as such, he could no more keep the plane of the upland in view. Suddenly, he got enthralled when he beheld three girls singing some folk lays full throatedly while gathering wild vegetables like dandelion and rumex.

One of them seemed to be married, another was in her prime youth and the third one was only a child. They too saw him, stopped singing and stood up to see who he was. He tidied himself up and continued walking, assuming nonchalance. His perspiring forehead irked him.

“Who is he?” The youthful girl asked the elder one.
‘Someone he must be. Who knows?’ She replied.

The girl in her early teens, nestled close to her elder companion. He again felt himself an odd man. He removed his goggles and, feigning a cough, asked the girls.

‘Could you please tell me the way to Nayakpora?’ He received no reply. He wiped off the hanging sweat drops from his forehead.

‘I am asking you, girls - Is this path leading to Nayakpora?’ The youthful girl giggled and said to the eldest one.

‘Why don’t you tell him? Tell him please.’

‘Yes’. The eldest girl felt encouraged and said in a shout, ‘But you should have crossed the stream by the pole-bridge. Listen. There is a ford only a little ahead. When you go across, ascend the steep.’

Having received all this instruction, he heaved a sigh of relief and walked again. But he could not forget the girls and their

enchanting lays. He looked back and found them staring at him.

'A strange fellow!' the youthful girl said and laughed audaciously.

The ford was not farther than a minute-walk. Having crossed the stream, he again looked back, the youthful one was standing on the stone-wall, gazing at him. He went up the steep and again looked back, the girls were out of sight.

Nayakpora was a cornfield in his childhood. It would grow stunted maize, beans and vetch and that too, when it received rain-timely or untimely, or it remained a nude upland of yellowish clay, abounding in old potshells. He saw no maize or potshells there - only luxuriant apple trees could be seen all around. The big plane and a smaller one, not much away from each other, stood there conspicuously as the souvenirs of the bygone times.

He entered his own piece of apple orchard. He did not feel the ecstasy he had felt in the first orchard. A strange melancholy overwhelmed him. Yet he went from tree to tree, touched the bark of each and cast a look on each of the blooming crowns. He came out and slithered warily among the hawthorns to the loop of the Tonger in the ravine where its waters flowed with unabated gusts. He reached his choice-spot shoaled with pebbles. To have a change, he washed his face there and walked a few steps in the shallow water over the sediment.

The day had already drawn to a close and the sky was overcast with thick swarthy clouds. He felt perturbed when ~~he looked~~ at his watch. he climbed the steep and sat to repose under the sprawling vernal branches of the big plane which stood there as it did years ago: a gigantic mass of foliage, mute like a hermit. He softly felt the ground, it was again velvety and slippery as it used to be in his childhood. All of a sudden, he shivered with a strange fear - He remembered Salama who died some twenty-five years

ago at the same spot when the yurt made of boulders collapsed over him. He remembered how Salama used to be always with him, and how in autumn days they loved to make bonfires to bake the cobs stolen from people's corn fields. He remained stirring his remembrances sweetly painful. He wished to give out a loud scream, but it got stuck in his throat. Nor could he soften his eyes with any tears. It had already started drizzling.

The sky was more densely decked and it looked to be hanging over the hamlets strewn in the valley below. The clouds had descended down the surrounding mountains and the Kousarnag was no more visible. To his left, far away, he could see a lonely passenger bus plying along the ridge of the wavy crest - perhaps to the city. He breathed a deep sigh and having lit the last cigarette of the pack, he looked deep into the foliage of the plane, as if adieuing a thousand faces dwelling there that eyed him with surprise. He then liesurely left for home on the clayey track between two grassy mounds.

It began to rain a little heavier and he no more liked the icy drops that pricked his skin and rolled the powdery clay producing mud. Hardly had he taken a hundred steps than it began to pour down in showers. All his clothes were thoroughly wet and glued to his skin. The cold penetrated him deep into the marrow. He shrunk his body and increased his pace, but his nylon sandals began menacing him. He chose to step on the turf patches along the sides of the muddy path. It rained so heavily that it washed away the memory of the sunny day. The bloom-laden trees also shrank themselves to avoid the downpour that hurried steadily. He looked back, the crest was completely enveloped by clouds. The gloaming began to contain everything that was still visible. There was no sound of any sort except that of the splashing rain. The birds had already huddled themselves in their unseen nests. It was very cold, indeed, but he began to feel the pinch of a different cold that emanated from his inmost, the cold of some unnamed fear.

He heard a tap-as if somebody struck a stick against something. He started, stopped and looked around to make out what the sound was, but could not sense anything. He took longer strides. The sound was heard again, but it was nearer. He looked back. A small boy was standing all alone under an elm, hardly some twenty or thirty steps away. His sparce garments had got pasted to his thin profile and his dense kinky hair was plastered down his forehead and ears. He held a wooden stick in his hand, and it was clear that it was the stick that he had struck at the elm. He felt that there was, after all, some other human being in the torrential rain going that empty way. He showed him to come closer, but the boy only smiled.

"Come nearer! I shall take you along. Don't be afraid of me."

He almost cried out to him, and quite confidently, but the showers washed away his voice as soon as it came out of his throat. The boy did not perhaps hear him, he thought.

"You listen me? It is already evening, come on!" Saying this he kneeled to draw up his wet soiled trousers and then he climbed the grass covered hog-back to make him hear. There was nobody there. "The poor child must have shied away from me," he reasoned with himself, while slithering down. He resumed plodding on the muddy path, flooded by the overflowing pools. He took cautious steps along the grassy edge.

He reached the small pole-bridge. There he sensed the sound again. He looked back. The same boy stood there, embracing a willow.

"Listen, you imp! I tell you come along. Why don't you come nearer?" Hardly had he winked than the child disappeared, as if dissolved in the downpour. Every hair on his scalp stood like a thorn. He somehow crossed the pole-bridge and plodded the

slippery path. He almost ran, but very clumsily. One of his chapals got stuck in the mud. He took out the other one, and bent down to pull out the one buried in the sticky mud. The goggles placed in the side pocket of his shirt creaked under the pressure of his ribs, and he stood up with a start. He could not choose what to save and what to let go. He stealthily raised his head to look around. He clenched his teeth when he saw the drenched child standing on the ridge of a rice field. He could not see his face nor his stick, only a silhouette stood there. He slipped and barely could save himself from falling into the pool, his clothes were all besmeared. He managed to stand up and wished to run home but he felt his legs heavier. He could not make it whether he walked or carried himself step by step.

Coming out of the ravine, he came to the top of the mound wherefrom the path was better for having been spread over with rounded stones by the *panchayat* people. He felt somewhat relieved that he could put on his chappal and walk steadily. There grew thorny bushes, of blackberry, briars and *thanival*¹ everywhere. It was not time of the *thanival* blossoms, yet he could sense the smell of its leaves. He halted to wring the clayey water out of his trousers and the skirt of his shirt. But the rain was so heavy that in no time his clothes were soaked again. He took counsel to himself that it was vain to try to tidy himself and that every step he took was to his advantage. He heard the child again - the child clattered his teeth and whined, as if with pain. A hiccup like shriek escaped his throat. He looked back and saw the boy standing behind a bush. He shivered with cold and made a piteous whine. He could not see his tears that were mingled with rain. A strange pang rose in his inmost. He pressed his chest with his hand, and supporting himself against a tree, he began staring at the miserable creature. He thought it useless to call him as that might scare him again. He wiped his face with both hands to clear it of the dribble and then looked to the bush, the boy had vanished as if dissolved

1.) A kind of wild fragrant yellow rose.

in the rain. He no more felt afraid of him, he rather felt compassionate. He tried to pull out a withy from a nearby pale, but soon felt ashamed of his demeanor for it was only a child in the rain that followed him. Having reassured himself, he looked all around, the child was seen nowhere.

The rain drops where so huge that when hurled down, they could stir the silt from the pools. All his body ached, particularly his bald head. He walked to the village.

He continuously heard the plaintive whine of the child, but it distanced away with every step, till it was heard no more. He had entered the village perlieus. He stopped and looked back, the crests and the uplands looked like huge monstors sleeping, some prone and some supine. The dark gloomy sky was weighing on them. Seeing the first signs of the dwellings he felt strength in his limbs but the weepy face of the child was still in his mind.

He did not take the path that ran through the full length of the village by the graveyard. Although he had made up his mind to visit the graves of his parents and his elder sister, he chose the longer path that was not muddy. There were no people to open their windows to eye him with curiosity. A couple of cows were there running clumsily and shaking their stuffed tummies and udders. The shopkeepers had drawn the shutters down. Two men nestling close to each other under one umbrella walked hurriedly across the road and vanished in a narrow street. A peasant wearing a blanket came out of the same street, crossed the road and disappeared in another street.

The rain had abated.

Kaka Lala, his elder brother, was anxiously waiting for him at the varendah. 'How sad! How tortuous this trip might have been to you! I wish you had taken an umbrella with you'. He said to him

to his drenched brother.

'But it was so fine in the morning.' Responding Kaka Lala's concern, he pussily entered the bathroom where he washed his feet and hands. Kaka Lala handed over a towel and his own dry shirt and trousers to him to change.

Inside the house, the children had raised a pondamonium, driving their aunty mad. His wife accompanied him upstairs where he changed from his wet clothes to put on a warm woollen sweater, then wrapped himself up in a cozy blanket, and came down in the kitchen. He quelled the childrens's noise, made them gather the strewn carrompieces and warmed himself up with a *Kangari* filled with glowing embers. Three cups of *Shyiry* tea made sumptuous with almonds helped him be himself again.

A palatial dinner sent all to an early sleep except the two brothers who had a long tete-a-tete while occupying themselves with the collection of antiques and old manuscripts possessed by Kaka Lala.

After staying confined to indoors for two days more, he along with his small family left for the city by the early-morning bus. With hugs and kisses the kids adieued the old couple and others gathered there. He had a long speechless shakehand with his brother and then with a choked voice took leave of his Aapa. They, each carrying a baggage, took seats close to each other.

The bus plied the road that took a half circle round the village along the ridge of the wavy plateau. Looking through the window, he spotted the far off big plane of Nayakpore growing aloft under a deep blue sky among the sprawling apple orchards. He continued staring at the plane till he could virtually hear the continuous whine of the child in the rain. It lacerated him.

The bus took a sharp turn, leaving the plane out of sight, and he attended to his family.

(Translated from the Kashmiri by the author)

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